

SOME EVERY DAY
FOLKS A NOVEL BY
EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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SOME EVERY-DAY FOLKS

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

*Author of "The End of a Life," "A Tiger's Cub," "In Sugar
Cane Land," etc.*

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

OSGOOD, McILVAINE & CO.

45, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1894

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
THE YELLOW MAN	1

CHAPTER II.

MISS MINNIFIE BEGINS LIFE ALONE.	20
--	----

CHAPTER III.

A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE	42
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S ANSWER	62
----------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT	81
-----------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. WATFORD DEPARTS.	105
-------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VII.

AN ELECTRIC SHOCK	125
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

FOREWARNED, FOREARMED	PAGE 146
---------------------------------	-------------

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMMANDER'S REWARD	167
----------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

ON BEHALF OF THE PRIORY PHEASANTS	191
---	-----

CHAPTER XI.

AFTERWARDS	219
----------------------	-----

CHAPTER XII.

AMONG THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS	248
------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII.

EXEUNT OMNES	263
------------------------	-----

SOME EVERY-DAY FOLKS.

CHAPTER I.

THE YELLOW MAN.

It is likely enough that the widower, Seth Gregson—the gentleman on whose behalf Joe Hannaford organized a benefit concert at the “Green Man”—has altogether faded from the reader’s mind. But he was not mentioned for nothing, and now drifts back into the stream of this narrative. Seth had not been shining lately. No honest work appeared available for him, and his old familiarity with the Priory Woods began to grow into a source of temptation. There had been a little poaching through the past winter, and one Charles Tripe—a dis-

reputable relation of Toby's, and a thorn in the side of that excellent man—had suffered a penalty of six months' imprisonment in consequence. No gamekeeper or other individual could absolutely associate Mr. Gregson with the matter, but Charles Tripe was known to be his great friend, and intimate; so many hinted that the grim Gregson should at least be sharing Charles' seclusion. He felt the hand of man was against him, and became morose, discontented, dangerous. Odd jobs upon outlying lands were all he could now command, for Heatherbridge was tired of him, and his old friends at the "Green Man" had long since agreed that Gregson was one of Heatherbridge's failures—a man who henceforth must go reeling down the hill of life his own drunken way.

"Sometimes I've a mind to forbid him the place altogether," declared Joe Hannaford on one occasion. "I would do so if there weren't no other public at hand, but there's plenty of choice. He'll only go elsewhere."

“Ah, that’s so, Joe,” said Michael Merle. “There’s mighty few spots in England as b’aint within a heasy walk of beer.”

So Gregson remained a constant customer, and his acquaintances watched him sinking from bad to worse. Miss Minnie and Mrs. Meadows had both tried to reclaim him, but without lasting result. He had taken everything they would give, and then, when the supplies ceased, he had suffered his reformation to cease also. He was, in fact, an idle scamp with low instincts, and no further ambition to be even a respectable member of society. His wife alone of all beings had exercised some power and control over him. She had kept him straight, as the phrase is ; but now she and the baby were gone, and Gregson became reduced to a blighted, reprobate condition, altogether useless and unlovely. Such men in a small community are beyond question vicious, for they set a bad example to youth, and draw the weak into their evil ways. Seth had a gun, and no more sorry spectacle could

be seen in Heatherbridge than this man wandering down the hedge-rows of a Sunday morning, with shabby curs and loafing, smoking boys at his heels.

One evening, at the time of Mr. Minnifie's death, Gregson walked forth from his cottage upon a private enterprise. In his breast lurked a dull, clownish animosity to everything in nature, and, above all, at his own place in creation. The squirrel and the mole were better off than he; the lonely hare, limping in moonlight down a grassy bye-way, had a happier life. He was walking up the hill which ran in a deep lane through the Priory Woods to the moorland above, and as he tramped forward, a fond frog hopped in the road before him. Thereupon, for mere brutality, he stopped and stamped the life out of it. The sight of a contented creature angered him.

"I'll larn y'e to be a toad!" he said, gruffly, addressing the defunct reptile.

This incidental murder refreshed the man, and he proceeded upon his way. Presently, having breasted the hill, he walked onwards between a loosely piled

granite wall on one side and great gorse bushes, their bright blossoms wan and ghostly in moonlight, upon the other. The white flint road gleamed over the moor; the silence broken only by a distant murmur of water, was most musical. Gregson proceeded and then met a fellow-creature coming the other way.

"Got a match, mate?" asked the stranger.

Seth produced one, and watched the man light it, and shelter it behind a horny, dirty hand. The match burnt in a blue bead; then the fire licked the wood, and grew into a strong flame. While the stranger applied it to his pipe, Gregson noted that his face was particularly hideous. It showed an ugly scar down one side—a gash which took his eye in its course, though the orb itself remained, bright enough. He had a yellow poll, and yellow whiskers which joined under his chin. His sallow visage was in fact framed in yellow hair, and the result, thanks to a very long and clean shaven upper lip, proved altogether ape-like. This man, it may be noted,

was seen upon the following day in Heatherbridge. Mrs. Meadows chanced to be amongst those who observed him ; and that circumstance, together with others, which she mentioned at the time, led to a night-light in her bedroom, as has been chronicled.

“ Which is the way to a place by the name of Heatherbridge, lad ? ” asked the yellow man.

“ I be just come from there. Follow your nose down long. ’Tis straight over the hills through the woods.”

“ Do ’e know the place ? ”

“ I lives there. Not that it’s any catch of a place—a one-horse hole, with no decent work for the likes of me, though I be heager and willing for it.”

“ That’s bad ; but it’s common nowa-days. I’m a man as ’as done a sight of dirty work in my time—honest but dirty. D’you know Heatherbridge well and the people ? ”

“ Well enough. The people’s right, except the gentlefolks. They be a purse-proud, stuck-up crew. See them woods, black and grey, sloping down in the

moonlight? They're full of game, and I was game-keeper there once, but now new folks is there, and I, bein' a poor workin' man, aint no account, and off I'm turned. Why should self-made coves like them damn Brownes 'ave the turning off of me?"

The yellow man could find no ready answer to this question. So he asked another,—

"Why should there be any difference? Seems to me that birth's a mere chance. Too much is made of it. Too much importance is give to it. Why should one man up and say, 'These 'ere pheasants is mine'? A pheasant is just a natural bird; and I say that the fowls of the air never ought to belong to no one man more than another. You might as well say this 'ere piece of the sea is mine and every fish in it is mine likewise."

"You've got my views, just the same as if I was speakin' of 'em myself," declared Gregson. "I 'old no man's a right to claim for his own a natural thing like a fish, nor yet a bird; and for that very reason I'm goin' to the Meavy

river, this blessed moment, with a purpose to catch some big trout I knows to be lyin' in a certain spot."

"Poaching, mate?"

"Call it what you darned please. It's my view I've a right to 'em."

"I'll come. I'm dog tired, but I'll come and lend a 'and if you'll put me up somewheres to-night. I've got a ten-shilling gold bit, and seven and sixpence also in silver, so you needn't be frightened."

"Seein' your views," said Mr. Gregson, "I'm agreeable to be pals, 'cause I think the same. You may help me now if you please; and you may come home long after. I've a cottage, out of which I reckon to be turned any day, now, owin' to bein' back'ard with rent. But 'alf-a-crown a week's a big tax on a man; and the female what owns the 'ouse 'as got all she wants, so she'll have to wait, or else be a disgrace to 'uman nature and turn me out. What might you be after in 'Eatherbridge?"

The yellow man did not answer immediately. Then he said,—

“ Well, I’m from Launceston and was from Plymouth. My wife’s a party that gave me hell for four years ; then we parted company. She was Irish and cruel ’ard to stand ; but seein’ I kept her all that time, and that I’m down on my luck now and her doing well, I guess I’ve a right to lay a claim.”

“ Where is she, then ? ”

“ In Heatherbridge, so I hear tell. Flourishing and thriving and putting by a bit for all I know. So I reckon to look her up.”

The two rough creatures grew very friendly, their “ views ” being absolutely similar upon most of the questions which arose. Presently, reaching a valley where murmured a trout stream, they got over a fence, made for the river-side, and anon found a bank hanging over black and silent waters, beneath which Gregson believed were lying sundry big trout. But whether these desirable fish had gone elsewhere, or the poacher’s efforts were not sufficiently skilled to capture them, certain it is that his net came to hand empty again and again.

"Curse the brutes," he presently remarked. "They was here, 'cause I seed them. Some daft fool's stirred 'em out."

"Chuck it for to-night, and take me where we can get a bit of supper. I'm that 'ungry," said the yellow man.

"Must chuck it, whether I will or no. The water-keeper's due on his night round in a short while. I'll kill them trout some time, if I poison the water for 'em."

Then he dragged up his wet net and stuffed it under his coat. He knew some short cuts through Barrow Hurst Burrows, Mr. Cooper's property, which now surrounded them; and, soon afterwards, Seth and his new friend were upon the main road for Heatherbridge.

"What's your name, mate?" asked Mr. Gregson, suddenly.

"Foster."

"Mine's Gregson. You'd best come along with me to-night. We'll go to the 'Green Man,' and you can stand me a pint in exchange for a bed. Is your wife in service in these parts? Mine's dead."

"Can't say. She's a bad lot as ever

broke down a patient man. Lord ! such a strapper ! 'ow we did use to leather one another ! ”

At length the travellers reached Joe Hannaford's hostelry, and that worthy regarded the stranger with interest, as, indeed, did the rest of the company.

He was certainly a hideous being, and his scarred eye attracted absolute admiration.

“ You've had a nasty chip out of your countenance ? ” said Joe, inquiringly, as he cut the hungry new-comer a large slice of bread and cheese.

“ I have,” admitted Mr. Foster. “ I'll trouble you for the mustard.”

“ Ah—mustard with cheese ; that's a London fashion, ain't it ? ”

“ I did learn to eat cheese so in London,” said the yellow man. “ As to my mug,” he continued, in a thick voice, produced by a full mouth—“ as to my mug, I fell off a scaffold and put out my 'and with a trowel in it to save my face. The 'orspital gents reckoned I was a miracle to live.”

“ But the strange thing be your eyes,

sonny," said Mr. Merle, who put on a pair of spectacles and examined the stranger minutely; "I knows what's due from man to man, as nobody doubts, and I ain't one to make remarks in any way uncalled for upon no stranger, am I, Joe?"

"Not you, gaffer," acquiesced Mr. Hannaford.

"Exactly. But I be mazed with your eyes. Why, darn it all, they'm different colours, as I can see, though three figure old."

"They are so, along of a fool in London," said Mr. Foster. "I won't take this here heye hout, 'cause that 'ud turn 'em queer as 'as soft stomichs; but I could. The reddish eye, as wanders around, is my own; 'tother one, as looks ahead, and never blinks, ain't no eye at all—only a glass bead, what I got from a man as stuffs animals—a naturalist."

"I've heard tell of 'em, but I've never seen 'em a starin' out of a 'ead," said Mr. Merle, with keen interest, "that life-like, too! Yet I seen it was no true flesh and blood eye from the furst, didn't I, Joe?"

"A terrible coorious eye, sure 'nuff," said Mr. Hannaford.

"It was a heye made for a stuffed dog," admitted Mr. Foster, frankly; "but, my friend, he 'ad to put others in the dog, 'cause the owner didn't fancy 'em. Then he faked this one up, and I gave 'im a tanner for it. It's better than nothing at all. Some day I reckon to go to London again, and then, if funds is up, I doubt I'll get a proper eye-maker, and have a tidy new 'un. But there's no doin' nothing for a visage like mine."

"You be hugly enough for a show," admitted Mr. Merle; "not as I'd say a word to hurt the feelin's of any fellow man; but the truth's the truth."

It presently transpired that Mr. Foster was a bricklayer, and trusted to find work in Heatherbridge. Nobody could throw out much hope, but Joe Hannaford gave him the names and addresses of certain persons who might employ him. The yellow man, after he had eaten and drunk, proved excellent company. He was full of anecdotes, extremely talkative, and wonderfully skilled in little

public-house feats, with corks and glasses and boxes of matches, which were new to the frequenters of the "Green Man." His radical views and his unblushing expression of them, brisked up political argument in the tap-room, and put old Merle upon his metal. He had been cock of the walk so long, and had, by sheer weight of years, so completely won his juniors to his own way of thinking, that discussion was practically at an end; but the yellow man saw nothing particularly convincing about old Michael Merle. He had lived in the East of London; he had taken his part in a Trafalgar Square riot, in the days when present members of Parliament waved red flags from between Nelson's lions. The venerable Merle, therefore, polished up his armour and entered the lists once more—a task he seemed quite equal to.

Mr. Foster took up his temporary residence with Gregson. He spent a week in seeking work and in searching for his wife, but neither quest prospered for a while.

Though the new arrival failed to find

his wife, however, that lady saw him upon a certain occasion walking in the open street; and the result was a frantic nocturnal visit to a friend.

Miss Minnifie's niece gave Bridget permission to go and see Miss Minnifie; and though the Irish girl's visit was paid only two short days after the funeral of Wisdom, yet Miss Minnifie saw her willingly and listened to her story.

Bridget, who was in the quiet grey dress of the Home, rose and curtsied to Miss Minnifie.

"Sit down," said that lady. "First let me thank you for your funeral wreath. I was greatly gratified, Bridget. It showed me that you are mending. And I hear excellent accounts, too. But what is the matter now?"

"Sure, the awfulest thing, Miss Minnifie, miss, that could fall. Me husband's come: Foster. What'll I do now?"

"Are you sure? Who told you?"

"Me eyes. I was walkin' with the others, and me eyes lighted on the divil—beg pardon, miss. Anyhow, I saw him and shook. He's on the thramp

to find me. But he mustn't, Miss Minnie, miss ; he mustn't do it."

"As to that," said Miss Minnie, "we shall see. I will look into the matter. You need not fear. If the man is not a reformed character, then you shall in no case return to him."

"Him reformed ! Him, with his glarin' false eye and wicked habits ! Shure a tiger might sooner. But I, that am a dacent woman now—oh, there can't be no law to make me go back !"

"The thing shall, as I tell you, be inquired into. He may be at work here or he may have gone again. What is he like ?"

"Like nothin' ilse in nachur, miss : a short, square, yaller-haired man, with only wan eye in 's head and the other glass."

"A friend of mine will very possibly be able to ascertain particulars. Come and see me again the night after to-morrow night, Bridget. And don't go out walking as usual with the rest. Keep at home. If he saw you in a public street there might be some unpleasantness."

"Thrue for you, Miss Minnifie, miss. Onpleasantness is nothing to what would be."

Then Bridget thanked her friend with Irish warmth, and so took her departure, leaving Miss Minnifie with a problem.

She approached the case of Mrs. Foster with a sigh. It might be considered the first step back into every-day life after all the exceptional and tragic circumstances of her father's death and burial.

This task of returning into the world was not so hard for Mercy Minnifie as it might have been to many natures. She found herself as capable as formerly of dealing with concerns. Wisdom, indeed, sat no longer in his chair, but, though reference to him was now impossible, yet his daughter made no mistakes, found herself confronted by no difficulty which her own judgment was unequal to dealing with. This fact surprised her a little at first, for she had quite expected to be much at sea without the old man. Then she felt her father's spirit must be watching over her. For many, many years she had deluded herself into the belief that

Wisdom inspired all her actions and regulated her goings. It was a strange example of self-deception, but very real to Miss Minnifie.

For the case in hand, a first step was, clearly, to see whether the man Foster had taken up his abode in Heatherbridge. Such a remarkable-looking creature must surely have attracted some attention. Miss Minnifie suspected that no better assistant than Commander Cragg need be sought to satisfy her upon these points. And next morning she took the matter up, beginning operations with a visit to "Trafalgar Lodge."

"It may appear soon, perhaps indelicately soon to you, Commander, that I should be seen in public again after my dear parent's funeral ; but though he has gone, his mind, I think, still actuates me. He would have said, 'Do not hang back from the affairs of life ; keep moving.' That was a favourite expression of his, to 'keep moving.' And I shall do so."

"You will be right, as you always are," answered Commander Cragg. Then Miss

Minnife, after listening to a few deep expressions of sympathy from the old sailor, thanked him for them, and proceeded to the subject in her mind.

CHAPTER II.

MISS MINNIFIE BEGINS LIFE ALONE.

“COMMANDER,” said Miss Minnifie, “there is, in this place, so I learn, a stranger. He is the husband of a poor Irishwoman—one of the girls at the Home and Laundry of which my niece is principal.”

“A splendid institution. I always subscribe to it every year,” declared the sailor.

“I know you do. It is a privilege which you should be thankful for. This man, Commander, lived at Plymouth, and separated from his wife under somewhat harrowing circumstances. Doubtless there were faults on both sides. She has been a bad woman in her time and is Irish, though, personally, I don’t think that should be brought up against her. God made them—I mean the Irish—for His

own inscrutable purposes. But her husband kicked her out of his home and she came here, and now it appears that he has done so. Probably he wishes to make friends and take her back. I shall see if this is to be arranged. But first I must find the man and inquire into his life and position in the world.

"I'll help you with great pleasure. What's his name?"

"Foster. The woman saw him, but fortunately he did not observe her, as she was walking in the livery of the Home with other girls. He is called Foster, and I understood his wife to say he had yellow hair and a glass eye. She shows no anxiety to rejoin him."

"Those facts will be sufficient for me to go upon," declared the Commander, noting them down in a little book. "I will call and report progress as soon as possible."

"Thank you very much. You will be doing a good work. I only trust it may become possible and right to bring this man and his wife together again. But if my judgment points in a contrary direc-

tion I shall not hesitate to keep them apart."

"Rather dangerous."

"I do not think so. When I am convinced that I am right, I never feel danger."

The Commander admitted that consciousness of rectitude was the best armour. Then, by one of those stupid slips in conversation, so inopportune and so frequent, a slight misunderstanding occurred. Commander Cragg mentioned the word "grave," and, not catching the context, his hearer naturally assumed that he alluded to the last resting-place of her dead father. The world had only one grave in it for Mercy Minnifie just then.

"A very beautiful stone will, of course, be set up presently," she said.

"Well, I don't know. I had an idea, but perhaps it's rather tomfoolery."

"Commander Cragg!"

"Don't you think so—to make so much fuss about nothing? People would only laugh."

"I hardly believe I can be hearing you," gasped Miss Minnifie.

"I'll stick one up if you like; but what's to be put on it?"

"*You* stick one up! You!"

"Well, I don't reckon it'll be done by public subscription. I'll just jam in a little wooden label or a slate if you think I ought to. I dare say he was better worth a marble slab than some who've made more fuss in the world—poor old bird."

Then Miss Minnifie caught her breath and kept silent until she had partially recovered. Such a hideous misunderstanding simply made her sick at heart.

"Oh, the parrot—of course."

After which it was the Commander's turn to be horrified, as he saw what had happened.

"How could I suppose—? Please forgive a thick-headed old fool, Miss Minnifie. I of all men! Oh, it was a noble sight, a most impressive spectacle: the funeral of your dear father. Can you stand the allusion? If not I will say no more about it. I was very much moved myself, I couldn't help it—couldn't have for a fortune."

“I think it was all happily ordered. Many were certainly deeply moved, as I observed. More should have been there. I noted that several were absent who should have been there. I think myself that an empty carriage is a hollow compliment—not that I should presume to judge anybody.”

“I think so too. Just reminds you people ain’t there. But I hardly noticed who was present and who wasn’t. I felt carried away by the solemnity of it—clean carried away.”

“We will talk more about the ceremony later on, Commander. I have much to thank all my friends for in this sore trial. But now the world must be faced again—without him. You will endeavour to find Foster, will you not?”

“He shall be found if still in Heather-bridge.”

They shook hands, and Miss Minnifie went upon her way.

Having visited Mr. Timpson, whom she supplied with full particulars for his pending obituary notice of Mr. Minnifie, the bereaved lady repaired to the

vicarage, with a purpose to see Mr. Meadows upon a question of considerable importance. She met Marian Deane by the way, and heard of the last engagement.

"The grave to-day, the altar to-morrow," said Miss Minnifie. "How events race one after the other in busy centres of human industry! and the Church involved with every step we take. Have you ever observed, Marian, how Mother-Church concerns herself with all our goings? A man can do nothing without her. She welcomes him on his arrival at her font; she confirms him; marries him, watches him through life, endeavours to make his future assured, and ultimately buries the mortal clay. Vincent Watford never struck me as convincing. Rather a conceited young man, in fact; but conceit is a general circumstance in young men. He writes books, does he not?"

"Yes, he is an author."

"An unpractical occupation. There is too much written and not enough done nowadays. Fiction I understand; that means novels. No, I cannot think it a

noble calling for a young gentleman if he is in earnest."

"But he writes with a purpose, Miss Minnifie; not mere stories. His ambition is to show human nature as it really is."

"A paltry ambition enough. We know what human nature really is: nothing to make a fuss about, or to insist upon. Rather let us learn to see what it might be and ought to be. As to Minnie Bird, I fear her bringing up has not improved a character prone to flippancy."

"She's a dear girl, really, but so high-spirited, so full of fresh young life."

"That's the same thing as forward. Young life was taught to keep in the background when I was a girl. I hope they may be happy. If he could get some regular work in an office, it would be so much better. This writing and having his name about on books at railway-stations and so forth is all a form of conceit, really. Young men have as much energy now as formerly. I think even that they are ready and willing to work and do their duty; but never in that

state of life unto which it has pleased God to call them. They want to shine and be out of the common. They won't be led, they must lead. It is a bad look out when the tendency of the age is to place the affairs of the world in the hands of young men—so my dear father used to say."

"I think you would like Mrs. Bird so much if you knew her better, Miss Minnie. She has such admiration for you."

"I have never denied her excellent points. But her regime lacks solidity; she is too popular. A man or woman who has no enemy can hardly be an object of absolute respect. Human nature is so constituted that to be without an enemy shows a fault somewhere. I shall, of course, take occasion to congratulate her upon her daughter's engagement when I am seeing people again."

Then the conversation drifted to Mr. Sprigge-Marshall and Mrs. Watford. Upon this great question Marian and Miss Minnie were altogether divided. The elder lady, although, as she took

occasion to say more than once, she never judged any man, woman or child, and had never allowed herself to do so, and never would, yet declared, without hesitation, that the curate's motives were superficially apparent to the meanest mind. Nothing but sordid considerations could have actuated him in such an unnatural proceeding—so she held.

“He is dragging his cloth in the dust,” said Miss Minnie.

“You never did sympathize with him, and I'm sure you are mistaken when you say so severe a thing,” answered Marian. “I think he is a very good man. He works so hard. He is above such a weakness as money.”

“You were always his warm supporter, as I recollect, my dear. Indeed there appears to have been a certain clerical glamour about him which blinded wiser eyes than yours, or at any rate more experienced ones. Honestly I think I was never misled. There is a difficulty with a clergyman of separating the human creature from his divine office. This I have always been able to do in the

past, thanks to the penetration of my dear parent. If girls only knew the harm they were bringing upon youthful clergy by admiring them so openly and pertinaciously, I am sure they wouldn't do it. Not that you ever admire him openly—far from it.”

“You say many things that are good to remember, Miss Minnifie.”

“I am but an echo—a poor, faint echo of a voice that is silent for ever, Marian. My father had a grip of matters ecclesiastical that was very remarkable. He took such broad views—not, of course, in a Church sense. I suppose he was amongst the most trustworthy living authorities about religious architecture; but his modesty, being stronger than anything, kept him from occupying the place his ability entitled him to. I must tell the vicar that, by the way. I am just going to see him now upon the subject of a funeral sermon. It occurs to me that one should be preached. He may have already arranged to preach one. In which case I shall be able to help him with facts.”

"I think he will feel that one should be preached. How beautifully he read the service, dear Miss Minnie."

"He did. I have a great respect for the vicar, although he is a very weak man. If he had married a different wife he might have acquired a significance and power for good here, which now he never can."

"I think she tries to do the right thing in her own way."

"My dear child, I should not dream of questioning the *motives* of her actions; though I must, in common with other people, deplore the results of them. It is really no excuse for a person, Marian, to say that they mean well. But if you want criticism of others, you must not come to me for it. I am, as it were, beginning life anew—beginning life all alone. In such a case, truly a woman needs to look to herself and see that her own feet do not stumble. Even had I formerly occupied myself unduly with other people's affairs, which is not the case, I should now have no time to do anything but my own duty. You leave

me here. I want to see more of you, Marian, for you suit me. Tell Mrs. Bird of my intention with respect to her. I shall appear in church on Sunday, and then receive visitors according to the custom. Good-bye, dear."

They separated; Marian went home, while Miss Minnifie proceeded to the vicarage and asked to see Mr. Meadows. He was in his study and greeted her kindly. First she thanked him for his admirable conduct of the funeral and then proceeded,—

"I recollect, Vicar, when the younger Bayliss was cut off very suddenly, that you improved the occasion and gave us a most forcible sermon. It struck me that with a man of some note, like my dear father, pulpit references would be a fitting tribute to his worth; more especially as church architecture was so strong a feature of his ability. Perhaps you had already thought of the propriety of such a step?"

"I confess I had not, Miss Minnifie, but that is my fault. The circumstance demands at least a few appropriate

thoughts. In the case of the poor lad, Bayliss, his extreme youth and the sudden nature of his end made his death a lesson which needed no illustration on my part. But the departure of an aged man is not without its own solemnity. Death is an impressive event always. We see that even the young man in his strength may die; we know that the old man must."

"Exactly; and an illustrious career is always so elevating, so full of precepts for us all. I have here a large number of facts, concerning exceptional moments in my father's life, together with some of the trials which have come upon him and striking remarks he has made at critical moments. I will leave them for your perusal. It has been a consolation to me to copy them out. I should not presume to do more than suggest, but such a sermon as I should like to hear, such a sermon as you could preach, would be very comforting to me."

"It shall be done. Leave these papers here and I will cull from them. I am glad of this opportunity to remind

church-going Heatherbridge of facts we are all too prone to forget."

Then Miss Minnifie went home, receiving upon the way numerous expressions of respectful sympathy from many who met her.

Meantime, Commander Cragg, having carried through the trifling secretarial duties demanded of him at the club, set about learning something of the man Foster. Among the first persons he met was one well able to furnish information. Joe Hannaford, of the "Green Man," knew all about the stranger.

"He be livin' along with Seth Gregson," he said. "He's a rum party, Commander Cragg, sir—a very sing'lar party altogether. He've got wrong notions, but he pays reg'lar. I learn 'ow 'e's alookin' for 'is wife. Bricklayin's his business, and 'e's got a job at Mr. Cooper's just now. Not a man I'd trust a yard, Commander Cragg; but, as I say, 'e pays reg'lar, which is all that concerns me and is in 'is favour."

"Lives with that scamp Gregson?"

"Yes, sir. Birds of a feather. Not

that he's such a bad lot as Gregson; but yet they be chums."

"Gregson's still in his cottage, I suppose?"

"Yes; thanks to a soft 'eart. 'E ain't paid old Mrs. Mortmain no rent for three months, and she lets 'im stop; and Seth glories in it."

"Thank you, Hannaford," said the Commander. "It appears that Foster's wife is in Heatherbridge; she has seen him. But be sure not to tell the man that this is so. The affair has been taken up by the cleverest lady in the place. Of course I mean Miss Minnifie. Don't you move in the matter. It is certain to be properly carried through if left to her."

"Certain sure. I'll keep my mouth shut, never fear, Commander Cragg. You see a publican's success pretty nigh depends on that. I'm no talker, else I'd have no respect from none."

The same evening, therefore, Commander Cragg was able to give Miss Minnifie just the information she wanted, and two days afterwards she proceeded

to Gregson's habitation, with a view to interviewing the yellow man himself.

Miss Minnifie had not often been in the little cottage since Mrs. Gregson's departure from it. Although that poor woman had always kept the place untidy, its present condition was far worse than in her time. Even an untidy woman is better than a drunken man. The room was a pig-sty and nothing less. Seth Gregson happened to be out on Miss Minnifie's visit, but the yellow man, having finished bricklaying operations for that day, sat by a small fire, smoking, and drinking a cup of tea, which he had just brewed for himself.

"Come in, come in," he said, as Miss Minnifie knocked. She obeyed, stepped into the den of a room, and quickly realized that she stood before the object of her inquiry.

"Mr. Foster, I believe?" she began.

"The same, ma'am," he admitted; "sit down and be at home. What name?"

He waved her to a chair and went on smoking, but made no attempt to rise or pay Miss Minnifie any respect. She,

rather astounded at conduct so unusual from an inferior, mentioned her name as quickly as possible, with a hope that the sound of it might bring him to reason. But though the name was familiar to Mr. Foster, as he now admitted, it evidently did not impress him in the least degree.

"Ah," he said, "Miss Minnie, eh? I've heard of you from my mate, Gregson. He don't speak in altogether raptures. You was good to his wife and hinfant, so I 'ears; but he says you ain't bin all that could be wished to him in person."

"Poor, sorry creature; does he indeed say so? He is a sad blot on our lower social order here. Will you take your pipe out of your mouth, please, and rise to your feet? You are in the presence of a lady."

The yellow man looked rather astonished. Then he shook his head and expectorated into the fire, as a preliminary to further speech.

"I'm one of the radical sort, I am. I don't hold with no vexatious distinctions.

There's only two sorts of people that I know : men and women."

"You have much to learn, then, and may pick up knowledge in Heather-bridge as quickly as anywhere. It is an intelligent and advanced centre. Class distinctions exist and will do so, even though you continue to display your benighted ill-breeding before a lady. I suppose those who think as you do, at least allow that a woman has some claim to man's courtesy and respect?"

"To be sure. If you calls yourself a woman, then we'll be friends. It's all this talk about rank and so on that puts my back up. There won't be no hearls and dooks in 'eaven. Not that I believe there's any such place, myself."

"And yet there is such a place, with room in it even for you."

"If you're one of them distric' visiting people, what pokes their noses into private 'ouses, in the name of the Lord, it'll save you trouble if I ask you to quit now. I'm a hatheist and don't believe in no-think. That's me in a nutshell. I reckon this world's a all round darned failure."

"It is not well to apply our own experience and our own performance to mankind," said Miss Minnifie. "If *you* were a type of human nature, your description of the world would doubtless be accurate enough; but you are only an example of a small, pernicious class—a class which shall not grow in Heatherbridge if I can prevent it."

"You can't prevent knowledge a spreading."

"No, but you may find that I can prevent ignorance from doing so."

"It's a free country. A man may go where he chooses."

"I do not mean that I should take steps to have you removed; but I shall undoubtedly take steps to have you reformed. That will not be my task, however; I shall leave it to other people—you want a man to deal with you."

"Thank you. And now maybe you'll tell me what you've come 'ere for—not merely a friendly hevening call, eh?"

"No, I came on a business matter, with a wish and hope to further your well-being in this world rather than the next.

However, my task must stand over. Others will have to occupy themselves with you first. You are mere wild, uncultured land. The axe and the pruning hook are needed. The ploughers must plough long furrows. Then it will be time enough to plant the grain. I happen to be familiar with your career. I could hardly understand it until I heard your views just now. Then of course I saw that your brutality to your wife, and your various shameful escapades are the natural results of your lamentable ideas."

"My wife! You can be some good after all. Tell me about her and we'll be friends."

"Your familiarity is absolutely disgusting. You must have come from London, I should think. I called here to talk of your wife, and only for that purpose; but any conversation upon the subject is idle for the present. You are not fit to have a wife."

"And her? What about her? She ain't turned out a hangel, 'as she? 'Cause if so, I'd like to 'ear the flap of 'er wings mighty soon."

"Your wife is learning her lesson. Whether she will ever return to you remains to be seen. You will decide her."

"Yes, precious sharp—froward cat-a-mountain. Don't think I want 'er for 'erself. Only I've kep' 'er for a longer time than ever she deserved; and now, if she's in luck, it's time I had a bit. And I will, and nobody'll stop me."

"She is free to choose, and her judgment, though backward enough, is, I think, sufficiently developed to enable her to take the right course."

"I want 'er address."

"You certainly will not get it from me. I may add that I shall take occasion to tell your companion that he is doing a grave wrong to the community in harbouring such a man as you in its midst. I hoped at one time he was turning to better courses. It is a case of the purged man seeking rest, finding none, and taking unto himself sundry devils worse than the first."

"I don't want no languidge 'ere; an' don't you stand there swearin' at me neither, 'cause I won't 'ave it from no

woman," said Mr. Foster with a threatening gesture.

"I have done. But we shall probably meet again. Your unfortunate wife is in good hands, and any attempt to see her against her wish will be frustrated. I warn you to turn while there is yet time."

"And so I'll warn you. If you takes my tip, you'll clear out 'fore I hurries you."

Miss Minnifie, on hearing this insult, purposely stepped back to make a further remark,—

"No threat from such an one as you would alarm me. I have nothing further to say at present, and therefore I take my leave."

Then she did so, while the yellow man, opening the flood-gates of his eloquence, scattered the ugliest and strongest language at his command.

CHAPTER III.

A QUESTION OF CONSCIENCE.

WHEN Mrs. Watford told the Rev. Sprigge-Marshall that she was going to London in a week's time for her wedding-dress and sundry other matters, he felt that to delay his pending confession much longer would be unreasonable. Although he had now thoroughly made up his mind, and quite convinced himself that none but purely conscientious motives were about to actuate him, he yet determined to see his vicar; and with that intention called upon Mr. Meadows on the same day that he heard of his lady-love's proposed visit to London.

“It's a question of the most delicate nature, and involves me personally, Mr. Meadows, so I felt pretty sure you would not mind giving me the benefit of your

advice," said the curate, sinking into the chair offered him, and putting his stick and soft clerical hat down on the floor at his side.

The interview took place in the vicar's study, and he, upon Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's introduction of the case, abandoned his desk, lowered the lamp to rest his eyes, and sat down in an easy chair opposite his visitor.

"My advice is at your service, my dear Mr. Sprigge-Marshall—very much at your service. Are we to concern ourselves with a question of fact, or do you refer to some possible contingency as yet in the future? Caution is good, but precaution better, as I always say."

"The question is one of fact, Vicar. Plainly, I have done an action which seemed good to me in the heat of the moment. The man in me won a victory over the priest."

"Well, well, that is only to say you *are* a man. The man and the priest must always do battle, my dear boy. It is a sign of spiritual health that you feel the battle rages."

“It is a great comfort to me to hear you say so, Vicar. Spiritual death is the worst sort of death, of course. But in this case the punishment is likely to be heavy; and it will not fall entirely upon my own shoulders. If I could have taken all the burden of this error upon myself, I should gladly have done so, and suffered in secret; but the question is: Have I any right to punish others?”

“It is not a thing to do if we can avoid it,” said the vicar, “but a typical quality of crime and sin and wrong-doing is, that retribution, when it comes, too often involves others beside the culprit. State your case, and then I shall the better judge what action seems indicated.”

“You are aware that I am engaged to be married, Mr. Meadows? In fact, I told you, as in duty bound, before anybody else. When the world was against us I had no doubt that I was in the right. I made the subject a matter for prayer before I proposed; and afterwards, though nobody had a good word for my action, I yet went quietly and firmly forward, knowing that my heart was

fixed and my conscience at peace. Now Heatherbridge has gradually become accustomed to the pending marriage, and people no longer question our right as adult, responsible beings to do as we please. I do not even think that my own motives are called in question any longer. You will believe that they were pure. But now comes the terrible thing, Vicar. No sooner has all opposition of a worldly nature ceased, no sooner have I lived down all the uncharitableness of this place, when a new and much more tremendous source of opposition to my engagement arises."

"If your mind is at peace, you will finally conquer this new attack, as you have the others."

"That is it: my mind is no longer at peace, Vicar. The new trouble comes from within. It is very trying; it is very hard; but I cannot escape from the dilemma. In fact I have increasing doubts—terribly increasing doubts as to whether this step is justified. Every day now adds to my conviction that I am about to do a wrong thing."

“This is very serious, indeed. Do you find you can analyze your emotions? That is so important. Where do they come from? Are they temptations from below or warnings from above?”

“I am tolerably certain, Vicar, that they are warnings from above. Prayer will not dispel them, reasoning cannot banish them. They grow upon me in the night watches, Vicar; there is no escaping from them.”

“We must endeavour to define the condition in language if we can,” said Mr. Meadows. “Would you be inclined to assert absolutely that your mental attitude towards the lady is changed?”

“I have shrunk from all definition, Vicar, but I see that we must face it. I am not prepared to say that I do not love her; but I do not love her as much as I love my own blessed calling. I have come to the conclusion, Vicar, that Mrs. Watford is no fit wife for a priest. As a man I spoke to her and became engaged to her; as a priest I now begin to bitterly regret that step. I want to do what is right at any cost to myself. But I feel

that the dignity of my calling is more to me than anything."

"There you are undoubtedly right. We must maintain that, no matter what personal tribulation is involved."

"Yes, I am prepared to sacrifice myself: I want to."

"Well, you may be altogether wrong in your estimate of Mrs. Watford. She has instincts I should regard as quite desirable in the wife of a clergyman. She has great generosity and is religious and kind-hearted. The question lies between two courses of action. Either you must break with her or you must not. Much will go to the decision of this most important and vital step in your life. Be frank with me, then. Tell me plainly what in your judgment points to the conclusion that this lady is a bad wife for a clergyman. Hide nothing. I assume you have entire confidence in me or you would not have approached me upon this most delicate of questions."

The vicar settled down and crossed his thin hands in his lap. He prepared himself to listen patiently. But his curate

was by no means equally ready to answer the straightforward question now put to him. His methods of thought were altogether nebulous and misty—as much on the subject of his own entanglement as upon every other. He was quite unequal to framing any formal and definite impeachment of Mrs. Watford as a possible wife for a priest; and he was much astonished that the vicar should have asked for such a thing. Indeed, the business-like manner in which Mr. Meadows approached the subject rather staggered him. In his secret heart the Rev. Sprigge-Marshall had suspected that his vicar would glide gently along and agree with his own views from start to finish. He hardly expected to have the matter boldly faced and intelligently thrashed out by such a placid, unassertive being as Fuller Meadows. But herein the curate erred altogether. Weak though he might be in the affairs of a parish, and in the art of rousing an agricultural district to proper religious enthusiasm, Mr. Meadows was a giant in his grasp of any nice ethical question. He loved such problems, and

approached them in a most luminous spirit. He was not afraid of telling any man the truth, and his judgment, though a ship without a helm in the sea of temporal concerns, never wavered before a point of conscience or religion.

“State your grounds for believing Mrs. Watford no wife for a priest. Everything hinges upon that. You are young, you may be mistaken. Your ideal of feminine nature may be unduly exalted. The wives of clergymen have their faults like other women. But charity covers much. I, however, have been singularly blessed in this respect, and may perhaps, for that reason, be prejudiced in favour of the married state for the clergy. Speak and hide nothing, as I said before.”

Mr. Meadows made this further remark finding his curate tardy of utterance; but now Mr. Sprigge-Marshall answered, feeling in some doubt of his ground.

“Well, Vicar,” he said, “it’s so difficult to specify exactly. The thing has grown upon me as a sort of instinct. I cannot point to any distinct fault, unless

it be a certain—a kind of rather weak feminine feeling for dress and appearance, together with a thirst for worldly pleasure that does not seem proper to Mrs. Watford's future position. My love does not blind me of course. She is a woman who has not thought very deeply, and is easily pleased with externals in matters of religion ; but I doubt if there is that back-bone of strength and determination and unselfishness one seeks, and should find, in the clergyman's wife."

"My dear young man, this is all hypercriticism. She might just as well say of you—or my wife might just as well say of me—that perfection was lacking. A perfect priest is just as rare as a perfect priest's wife, or a perfect anything else involving humanity. Humanity and perfection do not coalesce freely ; in fact they do not coalesce at all without the added ingredient of divinity. Is that all that troubles you ?"

"I am not quick in choice of words. I have not made my case very clear."

"Clear enough as far as it goes. You

are certainly mistaken, but it is curious that you should have been mistaken. That you should see Mrs. Watford—the woman you love—with such strangely critical eyes is most singular. Love usually blinds a man. In your case love has acted like a microscope, and magnified faults, not virtues. That is remarkable. Forgive me, but a doubt rises in my mind. Are you quite sure as to your own feeling towards Mrs. Watford?”

“As a priest or as a man?”

“Tut—tut—don’t keep quibbling in this feeble fashion,” said the vicar, irritably waving away the interruption with his hand. “A priest is a man, not an angel. All this hair-splitting and trifling becomes childish, if not ridiculous. Really, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall, you pose as though you were one of the Sons of God alluded to in Genesis. Doubtless some of them might have felt a question arise as to the propriety of their intercourse with the daughters of men. But candidly, you need not worry yourself. You are only a man and Mrs. Watford is

a woman. Do you love her or don't you? The question narrows to that."

"I am not sure, Vicar."

"Well, upon my word, I should ascertain at the earliest opportunity. You have proposed and been accepted. I understand the date is fixed. Candidly I should think that you will be much more likely to bring your cloth into contempt by breaking the engagement than by keeping it. Only don't palter with your conscience."

"You see, Vicar, the question of money crops up too. People have actually said that I married her for that."

"Well, you don't mind what people say, I suppose? Of course you didn't marry her for her money. That is sufficient answer to your own heart."

"Exactly; and as a matter of fact when she marries me her income will be reduced by two-thirds—that means it will be one thousand instead of three. Not that I knew it when I proposed—"

The Vicar started and looked at Mr. Sprigge-Marshall inquiringly.

“What d’you mean by that?” he asked rather sternly.

“Well, Mr. Meadows, money is a power, and I cannot pretend that I did not see great opportunities towards well-doing in Mrs. Watford’s fortune. I felt that, among other things, she wanted a strong hand to control her worldly wealth.”

There was a long pause, during which Mr. Sprigge-Marshall felt more uncomfortable than it is possible to suggest here, while the Vicar looked at him and through him calmly and critically in the lamp-light.

“I will tell you what you lack courage to tell yourself, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall,” said the older man at length. “The truth is that you have made a worldly mistake—a mistake which, if admitted by you, will strike the community with more than usual indignation in your case, because you happen to be a clergyman. Listen to your conscience, instead of drowning its voice by talking so much about it. Your conscience, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall, will tell you that you proposed to a woman with three thousand a year

because you thought you loved her. But when you found her fortune dwindle so suddenly and so unexpectedly, you also found your love beginning to diminish. That means your love depended upon a banking account."

"No, honestly, Vicar; I realized my mistake almost the moment after I had made it. I knew I didn't love her before I heard she would lose money by marrying again."

"You *did* realize the mistake? Then why tell me just now you were not sure?"

"I—you don't understand—you take me up as though you were a lawyer, Vicar. Of course, I'm quite sure that I *made* the mistake; but I'm not at all sure as to my course of action now. It all comes back to that. Ought I to marry her or ought I not? It is my conscience asking the question, whatever you may say to the contrary, Vicar," whined the young man.

"I think your conscience is *answering* the question, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall. I think, if you would only admit it, that

your conscience is telling you that your obligations are of a nature not to be escaped by any honourable man. Do not set your holy calling up between yourself and your future wife. Frankly, that is a very contemptible action. Do not deceive yourself, or, rather, do not pretend that you have done so. You cannot, now that you have heard me upon this subject. I say most emphatically that you should marry Mrs. Jane Watford. I wish that it was in my power to control your actions. I feel deeply upon the subject, I assure you. A question rises in my mind whether you have not quite mistaken your profession."

"I don't think you are very kind, Vicar—to a man so much younger than yourself too. I came for help and advice, not such hard words. It's not fair to bully a man in such a—in such trouble."

"My advice you have, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall. The hard words are merely true ones. It is time you heard the truth. You have been dwelling in a mist of error and gradually settling your mind to your own inclinations. This process

of gross self-deception cannot go any further now. You are faced with two courses, one of which is right and the other wrong."

"But it is only a question of opinion, Vicar, which is the right one and which the wrong. The world would say that to marry Mrs. Watford was wrong in my case."

"If you wanted the world's advice, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall, you need not have come to me. But perhaps you are libelling the world a little. There are honest, chivalrous gentlemen in the world still. Really my indignation rises within me as I listen to you and look at you. I do think that you present a very sorry spectacle, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall."

"Your opinion is that I ought not to break off my engagement, then?"

"Most emphatically that is my opinion."

"Well, Vicar, that's all I came for. You have heard the facts and pronounced judgment. I am very much obliged to you for helping a weak, sore-troubled brother. I will think over all that you

have said, and I'm sure it must help me to do right. You see marriage is a matter of life-long importance; it is eternal damnation or salvation, so far as earthly existence goes. Very likely it often decides people's destinations in the next world too. Still, if it is a question of right or wrong, I really have no option, I suppose."

"Really none, positively no option at all," said the Vicar. Then he added in a kinder voice: "Be true to yourself, young man, and be very sure that I, your Vicar, am actuated by desire to help you and advise the right course. Do you know that once in the far past the man who is now talking to you was stirred deeply by just such fears and alarms as those at present in your breast? He was engaged to be married, and there came a half-fear that his engagement was an error and would not end in an union of beauty and fitness. But it was nothing—only a shadow—a weakness on his part—a paltry suspicion that perhaps marriage with a strong personality and an exceptionally powerful will

would not redound to the dignity of his position in the land and in his sacred calling. How ill-founded were such unworthy alarms! Heaven blessed my union with more good things than I can say, with that boundless and beautiful reciprocity so essential between man and wife. You will understand now how and why I am so strong upon this question. Good-night, my dear young man. May God be with you and guide your decision."

"Good-night, Vicar," answered the curate, rising as Mr. Meadows rose, and shaking the extended hand. "Good-night, and thank you for all that you have said. I know your advice is very well-meant. I hope I shall profit by it when I come to think it all through."

But when the poor youth did weigh his elder's words he found little or no consolation in them. He had hoped and expected that the old man would take his own view, would in fact counsel him to follow the bent of his own determination; but now that his vicar had done no such thing, Mr. Sprigge-Marshall

could but think he had made a mistake in seeking him and his opinion. The advice which does not jump with our secret inclination can so easily be proved unsound.

"After all," he reflected, "there is a worldly side to the position. Even the vicar had to admit a parson is only a man. Some are not even that. Meadows himself is little better than a mole after all has been said and done. In fact, I pitched upon the wrong person for advice. But it is only one act of folly added to all the rest."

He went home resolved to settle the thing that night—to settle it by himself and with himself. He was feeling angry and ungodly and at war with the world. He considered himself as a martyr in some respects. Here he was slaving day and night and doing good work among the poor and so forth, and yet his private life was simply a miserable chaos. To-night he did not make the subject a matter of prayer at all. He lighted a cigar—the last of a choice hundred from Plymouth, still unpaid for—he poured out

a stiff dose of brandy and soda, lolled in a "University" chair by a little open window, and reflected upon the position.

"Meadows seemed so keen for me to drop the priest out altogether that I think I will," he said to himself. "When that's once done, it seems to me the position grows extremely simple—extremely simple indeed. No man of the world would think twice about it. I've been a fool, but who can say he hasn't some time or other? The difficulty in a wretched little place like this is to act without bringing her into a very painful position."

He rather liked picturing himself as a desperate man—a man fighting against long odds. He began to find that brandy and soda awoke new possibilities in him. He sat late and argued with himself. He was rather well read in the works of divines, and a sentence from the judicious Hooker continually occupied his mind that night: "It sometimes cometh to pass that the readiest way which a wise man hath to conquer, is to fly." A fool may also fly, and so occasionally escape from the consequences of his folly.

There seemed to be a good deal in Hooker's saying. To fly is undoubtedly a more dignified action, sometimes, than it looks to be, or sounds to be—so thought Mr. Sprigge-Marshall. He smoked his last cigar to the stump and went to bed rather unsteadily. He had practically decided as to a course of action, but he felt dimly conscious of having taken too much spirits, so, very wisely, he determined to wait and see how his present purposes and intentions looked by daylight before finally carrying them into action.

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S ANSWER.

THE days grew long, and a smiling June brought the usual flight of tourists to Heatherbridge. But local affairs were too interesting through this particular Summer to allow the residents much time for chance, exotic excitements. The Railway Extension Bill for the South Devon District passed through the final stage without a hitch; and now everybody knew that the following Autumn would see the matter really begun. Plans were already being drawn out for the Free Library, and Mr. Meadows, at Mr. Browne's invitation, had undertaken to form a Selection Committee, with a view to making choice of some three or four thousand volumes as a first instalment.

Of course there was a good deal of friction at first. No step in any direction can be taken in a small place without malcontents arising to question the wisdom of it. Thus, when Mr. Parkhouse was included upon the great Selection Committee, many declared that the result must mean certain volumes of pernicious, scientific literature, to be ultimately capped by his own dreaded achievement when it should appear. Again, not a few, including Miss Minnie, stoutly questioned the Vicar's judgment when he invited young Vincent Watford to draw up a list of standard works of fiction.

"I have not read a novel since I was married," said Mr. Meadows, "but you, as a writer of fiction, are doubtless familiar with all the best recent work. We will have Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and so forth. But my own experience of fiction ends with Thackeray and Dickens. Their later works, however, are unfamiliar to me. I read the literary journals, and note a tendency among writers of fiction to perhaps over-

estimate the importance of themselves and their books in a busy world ; but no doubt many novels not unworthy to be read have been produced during the past five-and-twenty years."

Vincent assured Mr. Meadows that this was the case, and henceforth devoted such leisure as he could spare from Minnie's society to the compilation of a careful and elaborate list of three hundred novels, beginning with Richardson in many volumes and ending with himself in one.

" We'll start with at least fifty yards of good classical stuff," said Mr. Browne, " and I'll undertake to add ten yards a year, if we find that Heatherbridge reads 'em. I leave the selection to you, Vicar, and those you may choose to help you ; but I bargain for the inclusion of one or two books—books that helped me along my own road—books not so well known as they should be. And mind you include your own sermons. A book of sermons is sometimes borrowed by mistake, and so does a grain of good before it's sent back."

The undertaking proceeded, and the Rev. Fuller Meadows was engaged upon his own part of the library: that chiefly concerned with patristic literature, when his curate paid him the long visit already chronicled. Before recording Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's final conclusions and detailing the startling actions based upon them, it will be necessary, however, to concern ourselves with other affairs. When Fred Browne went back to Cambridge, there was a little scene, worth mentioning, between him and Tim Bird. That youth called one day, shook hands with Fred, took a chair and something to smoke, and made speech:

"Well, I suppose I've got to congratulate you, Browne. You didn't give her much breathing time after I had gone. I'm getting over the anguish of the thing slowly. I wish you joy."

Fred looked at his former friend very keenly as he shut up his book and prepared to answer.

"If this is a joke, Bird, it's rather a rotten one," he said at length.

“‘Joke’! What d’you mean?” asked Tim, dropping the cigarette to which he had just helped himself.

“I see I was wrong,” answered the other. “I thought perhaps you had heard, and came here pretending you had not.”

“You don’t say—? Browne, my dear fellow, I shouldn’t have thought it was possible. I’m awfully sorry, old chap—awfully sorry and utterly floored. If you weren’t the man and I wasn’t, who the deuce was?”

“Nobody. That’s the point. Where a woman’s free there’s hope. I’m not beat yet.”

“I should have thought you were too proud not to take ‘no’ for an answer from a girl.”

“So should I. But I find I’m not.”

“Well, I don’t mind confessing that I am. I’m a sort of Johnny whose affection wants a thrill of responsive affection. If I don’t get it, my love goes out, like a jet of gas turned off. I could never ask a girl twice myself.”

Fred was annoyed at his tone of superiority.

"Probably there are different ways of saying 'no,' Bird. A woman may make it so definite that nobody but a born fool would ask her to change her mind ; or she may say it, and yet suggest a possibility of another answer at another time. We seem to have exchanged confidences like two hysterical school-girls over this affair from first to last, so I may tell you again that I don't reckon I'm beat yet."

"Well, you needn't lose your nerve with me."

"That's not particularly probable, is it? As I'm supposed to be reading now, perhaps you'll cut your call a bit short, old man. I'm going down after the fight is ended ; and I tell you what I want you to do : you must teach me to fish with a fly. It's about the only sport I haven't had a smack at yet."

So Tim withdrew, and despite his philosophic reflections, the misfortune of his friend was not wholly a source of sorrow to him ; while, as for Fred, though he had spoken in this stout and unbeaten fashion, he really cherished small hope of ultimate success now. Marian Deane

was not the girl to change her mind or modify her original refusal. He felt a conviction of that, whatever he might say to the contrary. Indeed he much doubted at times, whether, when again face to face with her, he would have courage sufficient to resume the closed discussion. Meantime he really worked very hard, considering his deep disappointment. There were three or four men up who could beat him easily, and several others who might do so, but these did not matter. His principal fear centred in a Girton girl. He held strong opinions about mathematical girls, and felt that defeat at the hands of this young lady would be extremely unpleasant. In the result, which may here be stated and done with, Fred disappointed himself and everybody concerned, by taking a place equivalent to that of ninth wrangler under the old scheme. He beat the Girton girl, but found himself bracketted with a lady from Newnham, and went down wishing he was dead. Despite his own tremendous determinations and lofty resolves, Fred's father's fears were

realized: Marian Deane, innocently enough, poor maid, had wrecked young Browne's degree and thrown a shadow over his career at the outset of it.

Before these tremendous circumstances became known, however, Mr. Browne had gratified a little personal curiosity and made a closer acquaintance with the lady of his son's heart. Opportunity offered for so doing upon an occasion when Marian accepted Miss Nancy's invitation to drink afternoon tea at the Priory. Afternoon tea was not a repast that Geoffrey affected at any time, but chancing to glance up from his study window on a certain afternoon, he saw Marian and his sister upon the terrace, and presently joined them in the drawing-room.

"Well, Miss Deane, and how's the world treating you—eh?"

"The world, in the shape of Miss Browne, is treating me very kindly indeed. I've just had a long tramp over the moor to see a little body who is ill up at Fox Tor; and Miss Browne, discovering me on my homeward way, was good

enough to stop her ponies and bring me back to tea."

"Ah, well, tea at this hour's a monstrous error," said Mr. Browne, tossing off the little cup of that refreshment which his sister handed to him. "Still, while there are ladies in the world, there will be afternoon tea, of course. Did you go through the woods on your way?"

"I did, and met Barron. I think, if he had his way, the privilege of the woodman's path would be denied even to such inoffensive creatures as myself."

"An admirable keeper. How that man is hated in Heatherbridge! I overheard two loafing scamps on the platform at the station a few days ago. They did not know me, of course. One said to the other: 'Then there's that blank Barron; he've got as many eyes in him as a blank peacock 'ave in 'is blank tail.' You may not understand that, Miss Deane, but it is a great compliment to Mr. Barron, I assure you."

"Was it anybody from Heatherbridge, Mr. Browne?"

"I cannot tell you. The speaker had a very ill-favoured appearance, and I should know him again. I'm expecting trouble in the woods this autumn. There are a class here who have been accustomed to help themselves, I fancy, under the old, lax management. In fact, things were going to the dogs in the preserves; but we have changed all that. My birds promise splendidly this year."

"People seemed to regard the Priory as a sort of public pleasure-ground, latterly, before you came."

"Yes, but they begin to learn now. That beauty, Tripe, will have finished his six months, I think, pretty soon."

"He has," said Marian. "He is back here. I saw him coming out of 'The Green Man' a day or two ago."

"Ah! I wonder that Hannaford allows such rubbish at his place. He's respectable and straightforward, I believe. But doubtless a publican must not be too particular."

"I'm sure I hope and pray," said Miss Nancy, "that we shall have no more horrors over the game. It is so terrible,

and it spoils all one's pleasure in the different dishes. I suppose the lower classes cannot be got to see that these wild things really belong to the owners of estates."

"Oh, yes, they can," said Geoffrey Browne. "They'll have to see. But we'd make it a deal clearer if the Game Laws were better worded."

"How is your son, Mr. Browne?" asked Marian, suddenly. The remark rather startled Fred's father. It struck him that under the circumstances it was a strange question for this girl to ask. But, after all, she did not know that the gentleman before her was familiar with certain facts.

"Fred's all right. He'll do great things, I hope. Anyway, he ought to. He's got good brains and good health, and every advantage."

"He is a brilliant man. I should think you were very proud of him, Mr. Browne."

"That's as may be. We'll see what the next month will bring forth. I've feared lately that he wasn't quite so fond

of work as he used to be. It's a thing to thank God for—a natural fondness for hard work. It's rare, but I thought he had it till lately."

"I'm sure he was always at his books when last down here, Geoffrey."

"I'm sure he was nothing of the kind, Nancy. Too much tobacco and too many long walks and so on. I'll wager now you saw him wandering about, miles away from his books, every day, Miss Deane?"

"No, indeed, I didn't, Mr. Browne. I met him once or twice. You couldn't expect him to be mathematical in my company, could you?"

"No, I suppose not. Star-gazing was your line, wasn't it?"

Marian laughed.

"I think he's a very clever astronomer," she said.

"It isn't a practical sort of occupation, that. In fact, Fred's getting more dreamy every day, it seems to me. Forgive a father who's really a little bothered about his only son. But did you, now, as an outsider, note any change

in him? Did it strike you, in any brief chat you chanced to have had with him, that Fred had anything on his mind?"

It may be considered rather mean of Mr. Browne to utilize his secret thus. Indeed, he felt it to be so; but he was very anxious to learn more of Marian. She could not well answer this question without giving him a glimpse of her moral character. "I shall not blame her much if she lies," thought Mr. Browne. "In fact, I cannot quite see how she is going to help it. Of course, she knows he had something on his mind, because he told her so, and seeing what it was, she'll probably tell a fib. If she does, it'll go to my credit; which is quite fair as a matter of business."

But Marian avoided the dilemma with perfect ease, though the question very much surprised her.

"I think that he had a great number of matters on his mind, Mr. Browne," she said. "I suppose every man has—old or young. He wants to do big things in the world, and I expect he will, too. He is most interesting to talk to. Then

there is his tremendous examination. That must weigh more heavily than anything just now."

But Mr. Browne, having once determined to incur the responsibility of making Marian tell an untruth, was not prepared to be baffled so easily.

"Did it strike you from anything he said that any one principal anxiety or interest was occupying his mind to the crowding out of everything else?"

Marian thought calmly for a moment before speaking. Then she answered,—

"Since you put it so, I think there was. In fact I am sure there was. He seemed full of an ambition when I last saw him—a new ambition; but not such a great one as many I have heard him express."

"Well, when he takes up a notion, he's dogged over it. Good or bad or indifferent, I expect he'll have his way and gratify this whim. But he's too unstable—too many-sided would be a better way of putting it. This affair that's occupying his mind now—when will it be settled? Did he give you any particulars?"

“Oh dear yes. He was most complimentary. He asked me what I thought of the project, and I ventured to point out objections. You’ll think that very impertinent of me, Mr. Browne, daring to criticize any notion of your clever son’s ; but I did. There really were objections which I could see perhaps more clearly than he could.”

Geoffrey Browne smiled grimly. He appreciated the girl’s cleverness and her entire self-command. He enjoyed the conversation extremely, and was in no hurry to precipitate its conclusion.

“I wonder if he will take your advice, Miss Deane? It’s a commodity Master Fred’s not fond of taking from anybody.”

“Really I think I spoke very wisely to him. You see a girl of nearly nineteen is older in many ways than a young man of twenty-one.”

“Then you fancy he will abide by—I mean accept your advice?”

Marian noticed the break and the amended sentence, but it conveyed no particular idea to her ; for that Fred’s

proposal had reached his father's ears was the last thing in the world she would have imagined possible.

"I expect he has long since forgotten all about his talk with me," she said, rising to depart. "Graver matters are filling his mind now. The trifle that was in it when I saw him last, will probably never return. Good-bye, Miss Brown, and thank you very much."

"I'll walk down to the lodge with you if I may," said Geoffrey.

"Of course; and it is good of you, but I wish you wouldn't trouble."

However, he got his hat and accompanied her. They talked of different topics until the lodge gates were reached, then, suddenly, taking Marian quite un-awares, Mr. Browne put a final question in a casual tone.

"Well, good-bye. Remember me to your father. By the way, what was that ambition of Fred's which we were discussing? I meant to ask you, but forgot to do so. What was it? I don't think the object of it was mentioned. If it was, I didn't catch it."

"I shouldn't trouble him about it, Mr. Browne. No doubt his time is pretty fully occupied just now."

"I haven't any intention of troubling him."

"Really you need not. I am certain there is no occasion."

"Well, you've got a way of dodging a direct question and no mistake! If I tell you I particularly want to know what my son said to you about his new ambition—what then?"

"Then, under the circumstances, Mr. Browne—seeing that you have found out I am trying to avoid the question, I should think it extremely rude of you to ask again," said Marian, laughing and holding out her hand. "But I know you won't ask me again."

"Well, well; I'm a rude old bear to worry you like this."

"Really I think you are. Good-bye."

The master of the Priory retreated, baffled, but beaming within himself; the persecuted heroine marched home, full of wonder at the object of this singular onslaught. It was clear that Fred's

father knew something of her recent interview with his son ; but he evidently wanted to know more. Finally Marian convinced herself that Mr. Browne must have somewhere, somehow, heard of the said meeting, but not of the result. From what she had said, however, he would be able to gather the sequel, if he had any brains at all. Marian saw that the old man felt pleased and could not hide it. This she assumed was the natural result of finding Fred a free man. No rich father would have cared for such a beggarly alliance for his son as one with the Deane family must represent. And meanwhile Mr. Browne, though rather amused, was still much surprised. He liked Marian, and gave her credit for a greater measure of good sense than he would ever have thought it possible to accord to any girl. "Doubtless," reflected Mr. Browne, very sagely—"doubtless she really loves the scamp, and yet sees how unreasonable it would be to take him at his word. She thinks of his prospects and relations and so forth—a wonderful piece of self-denial for so

young a woman. I must reward her somehow, in some way she won't guess that I'm the author of. A very good girl indeed, but out of the question as a wife for Fred, of course. Hang him! a wife indeed! He was in long frocks, bawling and drinking milk, yesterday!"

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT.

“WHEN I read the letter,” said Mrs. Meadows, in discussing the matter with friends afterwards, “when I grasped the facts, my heart absolutely stood still, and Fuller had to get the brandy, or I should undoubtedly have fainted.”

Though weary of the Rev. Sprigge-Marshall’s epistolary effusions (for, like a weak man, he took refuge in much writing of letters), this supreme effort on his part, this notable communication which caused the vicar’s wife’s heart to stand still, can scarcely be withheld. It was written to Mr. Meadows about four days after the curate’s nocturnal interview with that gentleman, and it ran as follows :—

“DEAR MR. MEADOWS,—Circumstances over which I have no control (for are not the best of us the victims of our environment?) compel me to a definite course of action in my present troubles. I cannot bring myself to think that your advice, recently given, was worthy of your utterance or of my acceptance. A Voice—louder than that of man—tells me that the married state is not for me. A growing conviction has now brought forth fruit. A Hand, as it were, from the clouds, points in no doubtful fashion; and I must obey. Whatever may be the ultimate result, I have quite determined to cut myself free from all ties of home and kindred, and go forth to bring light and truth to savage hearts that are beating under tropic suns. In other words, I am going out to South Africa as a missionary; and Providence, inscrutable in her ways, has willed that this sudden inspiration to right (I can call it no less) shall be realized with equal celerity. In fact, I sail from Dartmouth to-morrow, in the steamship *Drummond Castle*. I can hardly suppose that you or my Bishop will regard my action as one calling for grave condemnation or even censure. Remember *Who* leads me on. It would have been more

regular to have gone out with the due authority of the Society, I doubt not, but I differ with that admirable body in some particulars, and shall fight single-handed. Having put my hand to the plough, I shall not turn back. I know that hard times await me. I leave luxury and a woman who loves me, and a community which, I think, respects me—I leave all to follow the hard road indicated by my Master. Everything is in order, and I wish that I had been able to acquaint you with my plans sooner; but you will doubtless get a ‘locum tenens’ without difficulty by Sunday next, and a successor to me by the following Sunday. Thank you for all your kindness, and remember me sometimes when upon your knees. If you could have the hymn ‘For those in peril on the sea’ sung once or twice during the next three weeks, it would be a source of great gratification to me. I have written at some length to Mrs. Watford. She will understand everything. Good-bye; may God Almighty bless you and your cure of souls. Perhaps some day, in the time to come, if Heaven so wills it, I shall stand again in the pulpit of St. Simon and St. Jude’s, and make appeal for our black brothers and sisters; with

whose spiritual fortunes will henceforth be identified the name of your faithful and grateful friend,

“MARSHALL SPRIGGE-MARSHALL.”

In shorter phrase, and plainer, the curate had bolted. On the morning after his debauch with brandy, soda, and cigar, he wrote to his elder brother, and explained that his position was now such that a speedy step must be taken—out of Heatherbridge for choice. Sprigge-Marshall, senior, a cynical worldling, understood the change in the other's views, and took the hint suggested by a postscript to the curate's letter. This indicated that a reasonable sum of ready money would greatly simplify future actions. Meantime, the clergyman, with ease begot of increasing practice, built up within himself a new conscience, which spoke a new word. He quite believed the sincerity of this fatuous letter to his vicar. He thoroughly deluded himself into a conviction that it was sincere and genuine. He proposed to do great things among the Kaffirs and Zulus; and when his brother forwarded the good

round sum of five hundred pounds, coupled with a stipulation that Marshall Sprigge-Marshall should leave England for a year, the curate felt that Conscience and Providence were working together for good.

He wrote to his betrothed—a very beautiful letter—which reached her on the morning after he had gone ; and Jane Watford fainted dead away upon the reading of it. She was having breakfast in bed at the time, and when a cry from a servant brought her nephew to the room, he found his aunt, with less hair on her head than usual, lying—a ghastly, faded, quite old woman—huddled in a chaos of spilled coffee and milk, broken china and buttered toast, lumps of white sugar and poached eggs, and many sheets of note-paper, closely written.

Vincent bundled the counterpane, with its mingled mass of literary and other delicacies, off the bed into a corner ; then, taking the pillow from under his aunt's head, he laid her flat, and presently revived her. Anon Surgeon Dawes arrived, and found himself confronted

with an important and serious case, involving brain. Vincent rescued Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's letter later in the day. It was crushed and stained with yolk of egg, and butter and coffee, but the sense still remained sufficiently clear. It implied, amongst other matters, that the curate was at that moment in the English Channel, bound for the Cape, and that Vincent Watford's thousand pounds per annum existed no longer.

He walked over to see the Birds, but it was then nearly eleven o'clock, and they had heard the news already. Tim met Vincent in the garden.

"My God! this is a bad business, Watford," he said.

"You've heard, have you? Yes, it is—very. Are your people in?"

"Yes. Better come and see them. Minnie met Mr. Meadows. Poor Min's had hysterics since."

Major Bird and Mrs. Bird were sitting with long faces in the drawing-room.

"Any more news, Vincent?" asked the Major. In times of trouble or astonishment, people dispense with con-

ventional preliminaries. Men—perhaps brothers—who have not met for years will begin talking beside a death-bed as though the previous hour had seen them in close converse.

“No more news, Major Bird. I find you’ve already got the intelligence I came with.”

“Your aunt, Vincent, how is she?”

“Very ill, I’m afraid, Mrs. Bird. I left Surgeon Dawes with her. The scoundrel wrote a letter which she received this morning. It appears that he left Heatherbridge last night. Hales drove him to the station. All his books and things have been left at his rooms. They are packed up and directed to some place in London—his brother’s address, no doubt.”

“Never mind him—you, Vincent?”

“I have come about myself, Mrs. Bird. The sooner this trial is faced and the future position settled, the better. I am in your hands, and you must do what you think proper.”

“If there’s any law of right in the land, that canting brute should be

assegaied by cannibals and eaten within a week of landing. But I daresay he never went abroad at all."

"Be quiet, Tim," said the Major. "The position," he continued, "is simple. We are faced with a sudden alteration in the circumstances."

"Just so, Major. You see, from being what I may call a rich man, I've suddenly come down in the world again. I know what Minnie would say, and I'm glad she's not here just at this minute, because I must put myself in your hands, you see. I could not marry certainly for some years now. It will be a case of indefinite waiting or definite breaking off of our engagement."

"It is so terribly, terribly sudden. There is so much to think of," said Mrs. Bird. "Not that love depends on these changes and chances. We won't talk about it, Vincent—not just now—not about you, I mean. Of course there is your side of it too. Your poor, poor aunt. It might kill her."

"Oh no. She'll begin to realize her merciful escape presently."

"I certainly think the law ought to reach this disgrace to his profession," said the Major. "Upon my soul it is her curates who put the Church in danger. This is one of those cases when a Breach of Promise action ought to be brought. It is indeed."

"My dear Major, do go away to the Club now and leave me to think," said Mrs. Bird. "I want you all to go," she added; and the men obeyed. Then she went up to her unhappy daughter to ascertain her views.

"Candidly a Breach of Promise ought to be brought, with tremendous damages. They'd soon drag him back again; and he couldn't pay the damages, so he would go to gaol for contempt of Court, and that's the right place for him—a common scamp."

The Major, with this opinion strong in him, went down to the club; Vincent returned to see how his Aunt Jane fared, and Tim strolled to the Priory with the news, hoping that he might be the first to bring it there.

"Rough on your sister," said Fred, who knew the position.

"She'll stick to him though, if she's got to wait ten years."

"What reasons appear for this action?" asked Mr. James Browne.

"No reason to inquire, I should think," answered Geoffrey, putting down the *Western Morning News*. "A child could read the story. This poor wretch proposed to a woman with three thousand a year, and found he'd got to marry a woman with one thousand. So he changed his mind; and as he hadn't pluck to face the scandal of throwing her over, bolted in the name of the Lord. Let it be a lesson to you youngsters."

"But I ask what reasons *appear*, Geoffrey. I suppose Sprigge-Marshall left some reasons and explanations."

"Yes, Mr. Browne," answered Tim, "he's gone as a missionary to the Cape."

"If the Society only knew, I really doubt whether they would put such sacred trust into his hands," said Miss Nancy; and Fred laughed grimly when he heard of Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's destination and future occupation.

"Just the man to advertise British Christianity abroad," he said.

"I thought I'd let you know, Mr. Browne," concluded Tim as he prepared to depart. "But it will be all over Heatherbridge by noon, no doubt."

Of course it was. Nobody could think of anything else, from the vicar to Joe Hannaford, from Miss Minnifie to Miss Minnifie's niece. The general opinion appeared to be that the curate had gone mad. At the club, in public and private houses, in the shops and in the streets, Sprigge-Marshall's performance might have been heard upon every tongue. Two persons particularly rejoiced, or rather experienced unqualified satisfaction at the event—each from a different cause. Miss Minnifie felt that her fearless attitude towards the curate and her openly expressed judgment of him were now thoroughly justified by Fate. She asked herself what Heatherbridge would be saying, and she told herself that Heatherbridge must be pointing at her for a woman with knowledge of character little short

of miraculous. "Everybody," thought Miss Minnie in secret, "will recollect now how I had stood forth single-handed and denounced the community for their blind admiration of this young man."

But of course nobody recollected anything of the sort. Miss Minnie's name was never once mentioned. All Heatherbridge was saying "I knew it," "I never liked him." "I saw through him," "I told you so." Perhaps not quite everybody made such remarks, but there were few exceptions.

The second well-pleased individual did not keep his satisfaction at events to himself, but gloried in public. Mr. Parkhouse, like some greater philosophers, was wont to find a type in an individual. His aversion to creeds led him into extremes of an utterly unphilosophic nature; and he went down to the club brimming over with undignified satisfaction. Several men were in the card-room, but nobody suggested playing. Major Bird was talking when Mr. Parkhouse arrived. The Major had not heard his

own voice to such an extent in one day for many years.

“What d’you think of this?” inquired Mr. Parkhouse. “What d’you make of this, Major?”

“I say the man ought to be brought back—that’s my view,” answered Major Bird. “Telegrams should be sent to Malta, or Madeira, or Lisbon, or wherever the ship touches, and he ought to be arrested and brought back.”

“A pretty clergyman! What d’you think of the Church now, Browne?”

Commander Cragg remarked aside that he didn’t see what it had to with any church but St. Simon and St. Jude’s.

“You’re always ready to get a knife into a clergyman, Parkhouse. I think it’s unmanly myself. Seems to me a man who would hurt a clergyman would strike a woman or any other defenceless thing,” said Mr. Geoffrey Browne, who had caught a little of the local excitement and was at the club with his brother.

“My dear Browne, not a clergyman, but the *clergy*, with a capital C if you

like. A philosopher does not concern himself with units. But units make up masses. The institution which can produce Sprigge-Marshalls is doomed *ipso facto*.

"What's he done after all?" inquired Commander Cragg bluntly, but not speaking to Mr. Parkhouse. "He's done what many another fool has, in the Church or out. He's got into a mess, and seen no chance to escape like a man, and so bolted like a cur. I met Cooper, who said he thought the fellow was mad probably; but I think, though he may have been off his head a bit when he proposed to this lady, that he's got over it now; and this is the result."

"Mad or sane, he ought to be brought back," said the Major. It was his one idea.

"Mad or sane, he's a unit of an institution, and, as such, a subject for philosophic inquiry. No rational man can doubt that the institution which produces a Sprigge-Marshall stands self-condemned. I've said it before and I say it again," declared Mr. Parkhouse.

“ Well, and having said it, what d’you mean by it ? ” asked James Browne.

“ Good. What d’you mean by it ? ” echoed Geoffrey.

“ I mean,” answered Parkhouse sharply, for the Brownes always irritated him, “ I mean that, from effect, a thinking man is apt to turn to cause. What has been responsible for this catastrophe ? I will tell you : Oxford and a university education.”

“ Bosh ! ” said Commander Cragg, as if he were talking to the ceiling. Mr. Parkhouse cast a look that would have withered a more sensitive man. He and the Commander were still at daggers drawn and not on speaking terms.

“ As far as university education goes, I’m with you,” declared Mr. Browne. “ More money filters into Oxford and Cambridge than knowledge filters out ; but that’s neither here nor there. You’ve shifted your position. Your views about religion are getting worse and worse. Mine are pretty foggy, but I’ve got a sheet anchor holding firm ground of some sort ; you’ve got nothing, Parkhouse.”

“ ‘ Nothing ’ ! What have I spent my life in d’you suppose ? ”

“ In banging against a shut window, like a blue-bottle. I say it in a perfectly friendly spirit. You came in here just now absolutely delighted because that poor devil of a curate had broken loose and disgraced his cloth. ”

“ Upon my word, Browne ! ”

“ You did. You felt it was one for you—for your contention that the Church is played out. You couldn’t have been much more pleased if a bishop had been found drunk and disorderly, or an archbishop had forged a cheque. You’re a very clever man, no doubt, but you haven’t got an ounce of charity or breadth in your composition. Which is a pity. ”

Commander Cragg was calling down a tube in the wall, which communicated with the steward. He meant to order a whiskey and potash for himself, but the exquisite delight of hearing Geoffrey Browne thus criticize his enemy made him forget all about the refreshment. He listened with the mouth-piece in his hand, and at the end of Mr. Browne’s

said, "Hear, hear," very loud down the tube.

"You accuse ME of no breadth," gasped the philosopher. Then he stopped and sneered before proceeding in bitter tones: "I think you're getting to be a lot of old women in this place. One looks to a concourse of men for a measure of brain power, but it don't exist in Heatherbridge. To accuse me of lack of breadth is simply absurd, as you must know. As to charity, I don't really see that a rational being can bestow charity on this wretched creature, this cowardly fool of a curate."

"Nor I," said Major Bird. "I should like to see what sort of charity a jury would show him. If his bishop don't have him back, then I say that Mrs. Watford should take steps, and I hope she will. There are times when delicacy is thrown away. It will be false modesty not to bring an action."

"Does your wife think that, Major?" asked Mr. Browne.

"I don't know, Browne. Women are no judges of such a question. But that's what I think, and a good many more."

"She's dangerously ill at present—Mrs. Watford I mean," said Commander Cragg. "Dawes told me to-day that her condition may bring on brain fever or anything."

Surgeon Dawes entered soon afterwards and was happy to be able to state that his patient's health had mended a little since the morning.

"I left her discussing the position with her nephew. I am amazed myself at what I have managed to do with her in so short a time," he said.

"Did you hear anything? What line is she likely to take?" asked the Major.

"My dear Bird, I really cannot say. That is more a matter in which you will be interested than I shall be. By the way, your daughter is all right again, I trust?"

"Perfectly. Well, I only hope that young Watford will advise her to fight."

"A pretty show she'd make of herself if she did! The whole place would be l ughing, Major."

"Let it laugh, then, Cragg. Really I'm inclined to agree with Parkhouse.

All you men seem to think that this parson has done the right thing."

"He's done the right thing the wrong way: that's my opinion. He was right to break off this tom-fool of an engagement, but he was wrong to behave as he has behaved over it," said Geoffrey Browne.

So the discussion proceeded, and by common consent the party presently drifted to the billiard-room, where conversation could be continued in combination with a game of black pool.

In many a drawing-room was the same great matter being investigated. Mr. Sprigge-Marshall would have been astounded to find that the respect to which he alluded—the universal respect of Heatherbridge—which precious possession he confidently claimed, did by no means belong to him. At the Surgeon's house, for instance, there were met that afternoon Mrs. Dawes, Mrs. Deane (they had 'made it up' when their husbands did), Mrs. Meadows, Miss Minnie's niece, and Marian Deane. The last certainly did not stay when she found that there

was to be one topic of conversation only. But after her departure it transpired that all these admirable women, with the exception of Mrs. Meadows, who had been grossly deceived and admitted it, were never from the very first quite sure of the erring cleric.

"For my part," said Mrs. Dawes, who had caught a little of her husband's pomposity, "I confess that the Surgeon guided my judgment. He never trusted Mr. Sprigge-Marshall. He said that his eye was not steadfast."

"I noticed that myself," said Miss Minnie's niece. "I had occasion to speak with him sometimes on matters connected with the Home, and his eye always wandered away from my face. If I fixed my eyes firmly on him, as I always do when I speak, then his eyes immediately wandered."

"One always hears so much afterwards," said Mrs. Meadows, with a sigh. "Now he's gone, people have already told me a hundred-and-one things which I never so much as suspected."

"It is always so," said Mrs. Deane.

"One remembers things looking back. For instance, he constantly preached sermons that were not his own. My husband found him out several times; so did Miss Minnifie."

"That's nothing," answered the vicar's wife, firing up. "I asked him to do so myself. Of course *some* people are always ready to find a fault where none exists. I don't refer to the doctor, Mrs. Deane; but you mentioned another name. No remark from *her* would carry any weight with a well-regulated mind. Her niece will pardon me for speaking plainly. In fact the man had good points, and I don't fear to say so even now."

"He was a hard worker," said Miss Minnifie's niece. She had not resented the allusion to her aunt in the least.

"*Latterly* he was, so I understand," remarked Mrs. Dawes. "I don't think he was fond of work. It may have been a sort of insanity, that takes the form of great energy. But I think so much of poor Mrs. Watford—how sad!—what an end to her hopes! The Surgeon has practically saved her life; there can be

no doubt of that. The letter which Mr. Sprigge-Marshall wrote nearly killed her there and then."

"I understood she merely fainted," said Mrs. Deane, who disliked the way in which Mrs. Dawes always dragged in her husband.

"Oh, no—far worse than that—the brain affected—a very terrible condition. She is not out of the wood yet, Philip says."

"It certainly was enough to kill her," declared the vicar's wife. "The man's letter to my husband proved almost too much for me. My nerves have been quite shattered ever since. You see I brought him here. And I will say still, with all his faults, that he might have been a different man if he had not been tampered with. Yes, I will say that. A dead set was made. I am not blind. I warned him; I even fell out with her. I did everything a woman could do."

"I'm sure you have nothing to blame yourself with, Mrs. Meadows," said Mrs. Deane, and the others agreed with her.

"Well, I hope Heatherbridge won't

be hard upon an old woman," she said. She was very crushed and subdued, and the other ladies vied with each other in cheering her up and encouraging her. Even Miss Minnifie's niece, in her solid phlegmatic way, said that it was a pity the vicar's wife allowed herself to make it a personal matter. Miss Minnifie's niece had an extraordinary talent of identifying herself with nobody and no party. She was not devoid of character, but it was the character of a good-tempered domestic animal. People knew she was always the same to everybody, and never 'talked,' that is to say, gossipped. So she heard every side of every question, and was no more regarded in any apartment than a piece of furniture. Doors might have ears, but Miss Minnifie's niece appeared to have none; or if she had, there must have been close communication between them, for the choicest fragments of knowledge seemed to slip in at one and out of the other again immediately. Some held her to be a fool; some, perhaps better read in character, considered her to be as wise a

woman as any in Heatherbridge. I think that great credit was due to Miss Minnifie's niece, if her faculty did not happen to be a mere gift. To forget some things requires no little cleverness and strength of mind. In all social human exchanges of life the faculty of being dumb, and deaf, and blind is at times invaluable. But few can watch their own pot boil. We always want to see how our neighbour's prospers, and what is in it.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. WATFORD DEPARTS.

It required fully a fortnight of time to allay the whirl of excitement which the Rev. Sprigge-Marshall's startling actions had brought to Heatherbridge. At the end of that period his successor arrived: a bald man, with an impossible wife and several young children—a man judged superficially to be wholly uninteresting, and suspected to be Mr. Meadows' own choice. In fact the new curate was a piece of philanthropy, doubtless redounding to the vicar's credit, but hard on Heatherbridge. The Peytons said that Mr. Meadows had purposely found something in comparison with which even he himself would shine; but that was just a typical Peyton utterance. They always mistook vulgarity for sharpness.

Mrs. Watford escaped serious illness. Three days after her disappointment, she was up again and equal to seeing a few intimates. Mrs. Bird spent much time with her, and endeavoured, with all the force of argument at her command, to dissuade the widow from her last determination. This was an intention to leave Heatherbridge at once and for ever—no doubt a natural course enough under the circumstances. She forbade all further references to her trouble, and would not permit even her nephew to mention the name of Sprigge-Marshall in her presence. Outwardly, she was calm and self-contained before all but Vincent, but in secret she had black times with her own thoughts. Her passion was that of fair women: hot and strong, not calculated to last very long. She would like to have been in a position to shoot Mr. Sprigge-Marshall. Very possibly she would have sought him and tried to injure him physically if he had been within reach. But her nature was not equal to the toil and trouble and preliminary worry of going to the Cape

after him. She knew that by the time she got there the thirst for revenge would have grown blunt. If she had gone out and found him at last amid tropical scenery improving savages, she would only have wept and fallen at his feet, and made it awkward for him. She was not of the sort who can nurse their wrath and keep it warm. True, on the morning after the first shock, in a tempest of rage that threatened to bring a relapse, she offered her nephew a thousand pounds to follow the curate and demand satisfaction, or give him a public chastisement; but Vincent, gravely enough, pointed out the difficulties and objections to such a course, and refused to undertake the commission. Twenty-four hours afterwards Mrs. Watford blushed to think she could have made such a suggestion. Her anger ceased to be visible to the eyes of her fellow-creatures in a few days; but for some weeks it bubbled up within her by night. At such times she would curse the man from her heart, then pray God to forgive her, and anon curse yet again before

she slept. People said the matter had aged her to the extent of years. I do not think that was so, but it certainly made her careless of her appearance for a while, and lessened her self-respect. Finally she determined to leave Heatherbridge and seek distraction amid the former friends of her married life. She had lived in Kent, and to Kent she presently returned, a few days before the date fixed for her wedding. Miss Browne, Mrs. Bird and the rest, including Mrs. Meadows, all called to express farewell regrets, but a more sensational visit needs to be chronicled. Miss Minnifie, who occasionally permitted her conscience to override her judgment, became imbued with an idea that it would be well to give Mrs. Watford an opportunity to apologize to her before she left Heatherbridge.

"We have both seen tribulation since that unfortunate event," said Miss Minnifie to her niece. "For my own part, as one whose predictions have been verified to the hilt, I can afford to forget. Indeed, I think I bore no malice from the moment she left me after insulting my

dear father ; but it would very probably be a relief to the poor woman to know that I had forgiven her, and to hear that I was as ready as ever to be her friend."

The other lady rather doubted her aunt's opinion on this question, but of course she did not say so ; and three afternoons later Mercy Minnifie called on Jane Watford.

There is somewhere a wise saying to the effect that we can better bear our misfortunes than the comments of our friends upon them. Doubtless the condolence of enemies must be even more insupportable. Mrs. Watford would certainly not have seen her visitor, but it happened that they met in the garden of the widow's house. Miss Minnifie came round a corner suddenly, upon her way to the front-door, and she had shaken hands with the other before any escape could be made.

" I would not let you go, Mrs. Watford, without seeing you again. I forget the past few months entirely. I am content to remember that we were close friends once."

"You had better come indoors, Miss Minnifie. I am very occupied, and the furniture is nearly all out of the house ; but we cannot talk here. Tea is probably ready."

She led the way, and presently the women were seated over a cup of tea in Mrs. Watford's dismantled drawing-room.

Each waited for the other to speak, and at last Miss Minnifie began by touching upon personal matters.

"We have both been chastened of late. I think that human sorrow softens and sweetens, and leaves the sufferer the better, always supposing that it is taken from whence it really comes—taken in a right spirit. We cannot see it at the time, but the eyes grow clear after the first tears have dried."

"No, we cannot see it at the time, as you say, Miss Minnifie. And I don't think the conversation of well-meaning people, who have perhaps forgotten what it feels like to be in great trouble themselves, helps one to see it."

"Very true. Doubtless, numberless

well-meaning people have worried you to death lately. I never criticize, but some of us here lack tact perhaps—some of us who have had advantages, too. Personally, to touch once and once only on our past relations, I desire to say that I deeply regret they should have been anything but friendly. I am aware that circumstances strained them. I shall not presume to assert where the fault may have been. But I am frankly sorry if at any time in my zeal for truth I should have said a word that could have given you pain. I do not say that an apology from me is called for, but I make it. My dear father would have commended such a thing.”

It was a pity that she mentioned her father. The word revived a vision of a red chair and a shaking, bald head and an ugly word. It altered the nature of Jane Watford’s answer, and she replied coldly, after a brief pause: “I accept your apology. I have forgiven all those who have wronged me here.”

This statement rather staggered the elder woman. She had expected that

her lead would at least be followed, but it appeared that Mrs. Watford had no intention of either admitting a fault or expressing contrition for such a thing.

"And yet there are two sides to every difference of opinion," said Miss Minnifie.

"There are ; mine has been the losing side, the persecuted side. I have been more sinned against than sinning. I am not conscious of having merited my present hard cross."

"As to that, it may be a blessing in disguise. Crosses generally are. In fact, I do not hesitate to positively assert that it is. The time will come when you must admit that I am right. You have not sinned, Jane Watford, but forgive me if I say that you have erred. It is not a sin to misread a man's character and to believe statements which, uttered as truth, prove to be the reverse : it is only an error."

"I must ask you not to pursue that subject. *Of course*, I am not alluding to *that*. Even the tactless people you mentioned just now did not touch upon it."

Miss Minnifie put down her cup and

blew her nose. She always blew her nose when she felt her emotions rising. It was a good rule; it gave time for reason to work, and so saved the utterance of many hard words. She felt that in this self-sought interview she could not with propriety say much which she would like to say—much which might conduce to Mrs. Watford's ultimate welfare—much which might have been said had the widow called upon her instead of she upon the widow. But this last rebuke was not to be borne quite silently.

“I think you will remember that you opened these painful subjects,” she said. “You alluded to your hard cross. I naturally supposed that a brief reference to it would not be amiss. When you know a fellow-creature's heart is being eaten out with a great trouble, it is childish to sit and prattle of the weather or any other triviality. Either leave a sufferer alone or else tackle the difficulty and speak a note of hope and help.”

“Better leave a sufferer alone,” declared Mrs. Watford.

"I should have done so, but that you began it."

"It doesn't matter. Will you take any more tea? I am very busy this afternoon."

"No, thank you. No more tea. I am going, and I go wishing you well, Jane Watford—wishing you every blessing, I am sure. I forgive you too. I must say that you have expressed no feeling of sorrow for events now past and done with, but I forgive you freely, notwithstanding. I owe it to myself to let you know that I have forgiven everything—even allusions to one who has gone. That is really what I came to do, and, having done it, I will go. Understand me: I do not desire that there shall be any shadow between us—any source of regret upon which you or I could look back with uneasiness upon our death-beds."

"You are very good, I am sure."

"At any rate my motives are high. Good-bye, Jane. I do not think there is anything I can do to help you. If there is at any time, I trust you will not hesitate to let me know."

“Thank you. Good-bye.”

They shook hands, and Mrs. Watford rang the bell for the servant. Half a minute later Miss Minnie had departed. She walked home with her usual sprightly action, much wondering the while how it came about that this poor reed, Jane Watford, had managed to hold her own, and even suggest a sort of superiority, during their last two interviews. That former meeting, involving her dead parent, was still fresh in Miss Minnie's recollection, and now a scene, which she hoped would have gone to cancel the other, could not be considered in the least to have done so. However, Mercy Minnie entirely dismissed the matter after a short while, for other topics and concerns needed her undivided attention. A thing, once done, was done with her for ever. Jane Watford had crossed her own life at right angles, as it were. During a period of time, extending over about nine months, social intercourse of an amiable and also of an unfriendly description had obtained between them. Now their paths ran clear of each other

once more, never in human probability to converge again. So Miss Minnifie dismissed Jane Watford as one dismisses the characters of a finished piece of fiction. The chapters containing this woman's life history were complete so far as Heatherbridge was concerned. And Miss Minnifie never followed the careers of people who left Heatherbridge.

At present, indeed, she was more than sufficiently occupied with two lives at hand. The matter of Mr. Foster and Bridget did not advance towards solution, or, at any rate, to a sort of solution which could be considered satisfactory. The yellow man had no redeeming traits in his character. Those who attempted to do so, could find not so much as a germ of good likely to repay cultivation. One thing seemed absolutely certain: Bridget's temporal and eternal prosperity must both be wrecked by a return to her husband. So Miss Minnifie kept them apart, and, true to her first intention, set his own sex to work upon the yellow man. The vicar actually went himself to see Mr. Foster,

but their interview was short and unpleasant.

“The man is dangerous. Positively I apprehended violence,” explained Mr. Meadows. “I fear he is one of an increasing class here,” he continued. “Mr. Browne, whose gamekeepers are in touch with the lower orders, tells me that they say there are at present a large number of vagrant, ill-favoured fellows in Heatherbridge. They loaf about and frequent the hostelryes, and say, when questioned, that they are out of work and only waiting to be hired when the new railway shall be begun. This man is absolutely ferocious. Candidly, he is more a subject for the police than for me.”

Then Commander Cragg undertook to see the yellow man. He reported more favourably, and gave it as his opinion that Mr. Foster only wanted a firm hand over him.

“There are some very enlightened common men in Heatherbridge,” said Commander Cragg, “and none more so than Hannaford, the publican, and that

extraordinary old Merle, who is a sort of humble law-giver, prophet, and patriarch rolled into one. The labouring class look up to him, and he has the sound Tory views proper to his generation. Foster goes to the 'Green Man' and hears Merle and the others. He works for his living, too, but he shares a cottage with that brute Gregson. Now Gregson's a man who is doing harm, if you like."

"Gregson is still an unsolved problem. But how are we to reform Foster? That is the present point," declared Miss Minnifie.

"He's a rough beggar, and will go his own way. He's got wind of where his wife is, and he told me plainly that he'd have the law of those who were keeping her from him. I explained that she had no wish to return, and he said that he didn't believe it. 'She's mine with all her wicked ways, and it's share and share alike between man and wife, and I want her,' he said. He added that he wouldn't believe she didn't wish to go back to him, that he'd never believe it, in fact, until she told him so."

"I have no doubt she would do so willingly enough."

"So I thought, and that will cut the knot. I ventured to assure him his wife would have no objection to telling him so; and I added that if he would promise to leave the place afterwards—supposing her decision to go against him—that a meeting might be arranged."

"Daylight at last, Commander. Certainly you have done well, and I thank you. Nobody desires the man's reformation more than I do, but, after all, charity begins at home. He is not one of us. I certainly think we should be justified in getting him out of the place. Would he keep his word and go afterwards?"

"Yes, I'll guarantee that. He's one of those wild, good-for-nothing creatures, but I believe he has a sort of regard for his wife. Especially as he thinks she's making a little money. These people show their affection in such a peculiar way. Gad! he is a hideous piece of goods!"

"His unfortunate wife must be

thought of too. She was a hard subject, but wonders have been done with her. She trembles at the thought of returning to him."

"Well, she needn't now. See her and get her to meet him and send him to the right-about."

"I shall do so. Leave the rest in my hands. I will undertake that they shall meet and he shall hear his wife's view. After that you must see that the man keeps his promise. It is a sad arrangement enough, and I much wish that another, more in keeping with the divine institution of marriage, could have been arranged. But, seeing the terrible nature of this man, I cannot exercise any influence to make his wife go back."

"No, I really don't think you can for that matter."

"We live in such an atmosphere of sensation nowadays, Commander. Heatherbridge is always a sort of vortex of excitement. I often wonder if it is possible there can be so much doing in other centres of human activity. I suppose there is really. But it is most

demoralizing to the nerves and very bad for young people. The appetite grows by what it feeds upon. Events follow each other with such rapidity here that already in some quarters I begin to note a sort of unhealthy craving for excitement. We are always in a ferment."

"We are, there's no doubt about it; and yet some people actually affirm that Heatherbridge is the sleepest little hole on God's earth, Miss Minnie."

"I do not think I should repeat such remarks, Commander. They are quite inaccurate in the first place, and they become wrong and irreverent worded like that. I wish sometimes we *were* a little sleepier and enjoyed more repose. There is a dignity about repose. But the time is past for that. We press on, madly on, I may say, with the rest of the world. How wisely my dear father used to speak of Progress! How well he understood it! The true Progress of a nation or a community, Commander, comes from above, not below."

She proceeded to elaborate her simple

philosophy, and the Commander nodded at the commas, and acquiesced entirely at the full stops. Miss Minnie had 'got over' her parent's death more quickly than anybody supposed it would be possible for her to do so. She talked and acted with the old energy and conviction; and now Commander Cragg, as he always did upon the occasions of lengthened intercourse with her, fell to thinking about his next proposal. He had postponed the date, and at present it wanted a fortnight to the first of August, upon the afternoon of which day he designed to speak again. The death of her father and her present lonely condition made him hopeful. But much may happen in a fortnight. The busy tide of events upon which, as Miss Minnie considered, Heatherbridge was madly advancing crest-high, swept each individual along with it, and had for each, at some time or another, peculiar experiences or sudden changes and chances. Now it was the old sailor's turn to be, for a fleeting moment, the cynosure of the public eye; but before chronicling that

important matter, it may be well to close a recent episode, as far as any human episode can be closed, in the lifetime of those who are concerned with it. Mrs. Watford left Heatherbridge on the appointed day, and a considerable crowd of ladies assembled to see her off. There were some tears shed and promises were made of regular correspondence. Vincent Watford had already gone back to London. His sudden reverse and his sweetheart's attitude towards it brought out some characteristics in the young man which might scarcely have been expected. His conceit and slight superciliousness gave place to a manner and a method of conversation better in keeping with one who had his way to make—and a thorny way at that. Minnie absolutely refused to give him up under any consideration whatever; and, to do Mrs. Bird justice, she never attempted to question or influence her daughter's decision. In fact, everybody acted extremely sensibly and well and wisely—a fact to have been expected from such folks as the Birds. Even the Major admitted, after the first

heat of the moment, that a Breach of Promise Case was out of the question ; though he still felt that somebody ought to go abroad and get the curate back. As for Vincent, he took his tonic to the dregs, and it had braced him and did him good. He returned to London to work, to try and find journalistic employment and busy his leisure (if a journalist can be said to know the meaning of that word) in original labour.

Mr. Meadows communicated with the bishop upon the subject of Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's behaviour ; and the bishop did not make nearly as much fuss about it as he undoubtedly should have done. But *Timpson's Trumpet* had a very good article, and some interesting correspondence. The hymn ' For those in peril on the sea ' was not sung at St. Simon and St. Jude's. As for the new bald curate, Mrs. Meadows soon felt well enough to turn her attention to the matter.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ELECTRIC SHOCK.

It would be difficult to quite fathom Marian Deane's mind upon the subject of Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's last performance. One thing is certain : no personal feeling modified her decision or lessened her indignation at conduct which she regarded as very base. She had loved him in spite of herself ; now, in spite of herself and her charitable instincts towards other people generally, she felt it hard to think about him without feeling very angry. Such wonders do a few short months bring to pass. Indeed, Marian's mind did not dwell upon the curate very much. Her manner of life had changed and was still changing since her return home. She thought less and did more. The conviction that no environment is small

which can find ample employment for an individual amongst her own kind, grew into a sort of creed with Marian. She rejoiced in work, and so sternly checked the vague unsatisfied longings of her heart that they began to die. The old man whom she had met in Sark never found a readier follower for his rule of conduct.

Marian met Fred Browne here and there. They played together at a lawn-tennis party at the vicarage and went to one of Mrs. Bird's delightful picnics on the moor (to which everybody invited brought a hamper). That, of course, was before the sorry events recently related. Fred had not renewed the old topic, but in the eyes of Tim Bird, who watched him keenly upon those occasions of meeting when he himself was present, young Browne by no means conducted his intercourse with Marian as though the old ideas were quite abandoned. The girl, imagining the incident to be closed, was quite frank and friendly, did not disguise the fact that she enjoyed Fred's society, and spoke of him with platonic admira-

tion. But Heatherbridge, ignorant of the truth, began to jump to conclusions. Things were said to Mrs. Bird, and other things were whispered to Mrs. Deane, who began to get very fluttered. Meantime, Fred and his father were drifting apart, and had more than one passage at arms. The younger man's strength of character failed of force sufficient to drag him away to work. He could not banish the dream or quench hope. She was so beautiful; she seemed to have forgotten that former conversation so entirely. Years appeared to have elapsed since their meeting by the Poacher's Pool. The event was as dead as the blue-bells and spring flowers that framed it. He sat sometimes by the same spot and watched the young moorhens—half-grown birds now. In fact, he was sore smitten, torn in pieces, wretched, unequal to fighting the battle of life, till this great matter was set at rest. He could not consider that the last word had been said upon it. And yet he hesitated before speaking again. The girl evidently expected no such thing. He thought that if he

waited awhile she might gradually begin to see his ultimate intention. It was just possible that her next answer would be different. He tried hard to please her, and succeeded better than he knew, but meantime his relations with his father grew strained to breaking. Mr. Browne could not stand idleness. Summer holidays and a measure of rest after the struggle at Cambridge were all very well, but now Fred would not so much as clearly state the problem of his future, to make no mention of attacking it. His way was clear before him. He had all the world to choose from, all imaginable courses of life amid which to make selection.

“I bar the Army and the Navy,” Mr. Browne had said at an earlier stage in Fred’s career, “because one’s poverty and the other’s beggary, and neither’s got anything to show in these days ; but you may turn your hand to anything else that pleases you. You can make money by going into business if your instinct inclines you that way, or you can spend money and go into Parliament if the thing is to be done and you show yourself a capable

man. But if you're not a Liberal, then you don't get any help from me in that direction. For the rest, there's Law and the Church, though I'd rather you left the last alone. Doctoring isn't indicated, of course."

So Fred had gone to Cambridge, and now, from day to day, put off final decision, though he assured his father that he was devoting ceaseless thought to the subject.

Meanwhile he saw Marian, as I have said, and a time came when Dr. Deane considered it only right and proper to mention the young man openly to his daughter. Mrs. Deane begged him to do no such thing. She, for the life of her, could see no objection to matters taking their course, and held that any direct allusion to the affair must be most untimely and uncalled for; but the doctor did not agree with her. He was a proud man, and viewed unfavourably any such possibility as union with the Brownes. Upon an occasion of a game of croquet with his daughter in their little back garden—a circumscribed plot which admitted of no other sport—the doctor

therefore set out to discuss this delicate question; and the conversation resulting therefrom had doubtless been interesting enough but that it never took place. Thus chance nips human affairs in the bud and alters the lives of generations yet unborn by occurrences in themselves quite mean and contemptible. The physician had just struck off, and missed the first hoop, when he was urgently called. Surgeon Dawes had already gone to "Trafalgar Lodge," and now Dr. Deane's instant attendance became necessary also.

It happened in this wise. That morning Surgeon Dawes, then engaged upon his breakfast, received a most peremptory message from Commander Cragg. He went to the door himself to interview the servant.

"What is it now?" he said, his mouth not quite empty and indications of coffee about his moustache; "What's ill? That's the point. I'm not coming if it's only a dog, or a bird, or something."

"Bless you, no, sir," answered the Commander's gardener, "'tis the gentle-

man hisself. The 'ousekeeper 'eard 'im a 'ollerin' in the night, and this mornin' 'is fust word was, 'Send for Dawes.' So, when I got there, off I comes. Bein' a full-bodied man and a full-blooded man, sir, I reckon 'is end's upon 'im. There's 'is temper likewise : that be agin 'im also. That's what I ses to the 'ousekeeper 'fore I started."

"Oh, that's what you ses, is it? Well, just go back and say I'll be there in ten minutes' time or less—that is, ten minutes after you get back." Then Surgeon Dawes, directing that his horse should be saddled and brought to the front door, returned to his breakfast.

"It's the man himself who's ill, or I should not have dreamt of going," he said to his wife; and soon afterwards he cantered off to overtake the gardener on the way and reach "Trafalgar Lodge" some time before that indolent soul.

The Commander lay in bed, unshaved, fiery-eyed, with the clothes drawn up to his chin and a red silk night-cap pulled down over his ears, the point standing bolt upright. He was evidently labouring

under some severe nervous condition, as appeared from his preliminary remark.

"Don't look at me like that, Dawes! Confound it, you always walk into a room as though you'd just come from Heaven!"

"What d'you mean, Cragg?" asked the startled healer.

"Look at you now, bursting with importance, puffing out your chest and holding up your chin as if you were a medical archangel at least. Why can't you behave like other people?"

"Well! I suppose you haven't sent for me to give me a lesson in manners, have you?"

"No, I haven't. I've sent because I'm at death's door; but still I protest at the way you come into an invalid's room. It's sickening."

"Perhaps you'll tell me what's the matter, if you want me. You're well enough apparently to be singularly offensive."

"I'm not well at all. I've met with the most frightful accident it is possible to imagine. I doubt if you can do any-

thing. I'm saturated with electricity: that's what's the matter. Every organ is full of it. I don't know how the devil to draw it out of my system. It was last night. I forgot I'd put my electric burglar-trap up, and tried to come in from the back garden through the dining-room window. Then I got a shock that nearly turned me inside out. I thought it was the end of the world till I remembered that damned contrivance of mine. I just had strength to totter back into the house. And some hours later I realized that I was simply charged to the toe-nails with electric fluid—a sort of human Leyden jar. It's in my liver and brain and everywhere. My nerves are simply destroyed. Candidly, I believe I've done for myself."

"My dear Commander, let me relieve your anxieties. Really there is no cause for such alarm. As you survived the shock itself, you are to all intents and purposes safe."

"I tell you the electricity isn't out of me. I ought to know."

"You ought to, and you do. You

know as well as I do that the electricity couldn't have stopped in you. Why should it do so? Let me see—pulse flustered—distinctly so.”

“ ‘Flustered’! Yes, so would yours be. The marvel is I’ve got any.”

“ You need something soothing, something narcotic. I’ll send a dose along at once. Rest easy, my dear Commander. I guarantee you as well as ever you were in forty-eight hours. Bromide of potash is the thing in these cases.”

“ ‘These cases’! You talk as if you had to attend people shattered by electricity every afternoon. Don’t be so absurd. Don’t try to reassure me like that, Dawes, because it’s wicked. I’ve practically been struck by lightning. My vitality’s simply extinguished. It’s no good your saying there’s no danger in the face of that, because I *know* there’s danger. Surely I can judge of my feelings better than you can! I want a second opinion. Under the circumstances, I think I’m justified. I wish you to consult with somebody else—not that it’s much use, for my centres or

ganglions or whatever you call 'em are gone. Still I've a right to ask you to consult, and I do."

"Then I will, of course, Commander. With Dr. Deane, I suppose?"

"Yes, with Deane. I'll have him sent for; and I don't want you to go away meantime. I'm a shade better for your visit. I'm easier for you being here talking to me. I'll pay you for your morning. Only don't go. Can I take anything more likely to do good than brandy and milk? If so, make a suggestion."

Dr. Deane was sent for and the surgeon waited, reflecting with wonder at what strange passes medical matters in Heatherbridge had come to. When his colleague arrived, Commander Cragg had nearly exhausted Dawes's patience. The old sailor was evidently bent on getting his brace of practitioners to make out that his condition was hopeless; and this they certainly could not do. Indeed, though the idea seemed absurd, it really looked as though the stalwart Commander was suffering from hysteria and very little

else. He retold his experiences rapidly when Dr. Deane arrived, and then said,—

“Now I want you and Dawes to consult. Go ahead. Consult right here before me. Then I can help. I don’t wish you both to sneak off together into another room and concoct some yarn between you. I want you to consult here. Dawes says there’s very little the matter. I don’t agree with him. I believe all my vital centres are simply disorganized. Now what do you think? If you could get some idea of the state of the ganglions, I should be glad.”

“Humour him,” said Surgeon Dawes under his breath to his companion; but unfortunately the Commander heard the remark. He jumped up in bed and shook with anger, turning near as highly coloured as his night-cap.

“How *dare* you, Dawes? How *dare* you play the fool like that at a death-bed, for all you know to the contrary?”

“Be calm, Commander, be calm. I am working entirely in your interests,” said Dawes, who began to fancy that, after all, his patient might be worse than

he imagined. He had never heard of an electric shock sending anybody out of his mind, but really it now looked as though Commander Cragg was going mad. Surgeon Dawes tried subterfuge, and Dr. Deane, being quick to catch the situation, fell in with his view.

"Yes, really you are ill, Commander—honestly, you are worse than I at first thought," suddenly declared Dawes. "There's a lack of tone that I overlooked—an utter lack of tone, eh, Deane?"

"There's certainly a nervous condition to be described as grave," said Dr. Deane.

The Commander grew more cheerful and much calmer immediately.

"I knew you'd find it out when you got to work," he said. "If you'd only listened to me from the first, Dawes, it would have saved much time. A man's own instinct never lies in these matters. I'm very ill indeed. I know it, and you know it. Now go and do what you can with drugs and things. I want to be left. I'm just equal to writing letters and setting my house

straight and seeing a friend or two. Then if I must go, go I can."

"It is not really as serious as that, Commander. I should not say you were in danger," put in Dr. Deane.

"Yes, I am, and you needn't pretend I'm not," snapped back the patient. "I am dangerously ill, and it is impossible to say how the case may go. You can't blind me to it, and you oughtn't to try to. Send drugs and leave me now to consider of my position. Tell my house-keeper to let me have pens, ink, and paper. You will call again, of course—one or both of you—to-night or sooner. And you'd better order a sick nurse and all the rest of the paraphernalia along. I'll make a fight for it anyhow."

"Well, keep up your heart, Commander, and be sure we will do our best," said Surgeon Dawes. Then he and his companion departed.

"Mad or malingering?" said Dr. Deane shortly.

"I don't know; I don't think he's mad. He has some cranky notion, but I can't make out what it is yet. He's perfectly

well in body. We'd better give him something that will make him sleep for six weeks, I should think. Meantime it will soothe him to imagine himself really ill. He got quite savage with me, and absolutely coarse, when I told him there was nothing much the matter."

Surgeon Dawes then relieved the housekeeper's anxiety, and directed her, as he had directed Doctor Deane, to humour her patient.

The Commander, left to his own resources, did one or two remarkable things. First he ordered a pint of champagne and a tin of mock-turtle soup.

"In my condition it doesn't much matter what I take: the ganglions are simply gone; but champagne may keep me up, just for the necessary effort," he explained. Then he despatched a letter to Miss Minnie. The caligraphy was feeble, but whether because Commander Cragg used a pencil and wrote with no better support than the daily paper propped upon a pillow, or because the present precarious condition of his 'ganglions' robbed him of his usual fine powers

as a penman, I shall not undertake to say.

"Dear Miss Mercy Minnifie," he wrote, "your old friend is on his beam ends at last—in *extremis*, I fear. It has been terribly sudden and unexpected. Do not deny a wish which may be a dying wish. I must see you to-day. I do not think you will hesitate if your presence can ease a fellow-creature's last hours. Deane and Dawes have just left me. They try to be sanguine, but I am not deceived.—Your affectionate friend, J. Cragg (Commander, R.N.)."

This communication was sent off by hand at once. Then the Commander directed Mrs. Prescott, his housekeeper, to make further preparations.

"Rummage out my pyjamas with a pink stripe and put 'em to the fire. Then tidy everything up and get my glasses and my bible alongside. Take a tack in the blind too."

Presently he rose, shaved himself, donned the ornamental pyjamas, and then returned to bed. He never looked better in his life, and, after the champagne, never felt better. But he had the

medicine arranged by his bible, and then occupied himself with his last will and testament. Several people called to know how he prospered, and, amongst them, a young man who reported for *Timpson's Trumpet*. The Commander had him up and in feeble tones related his hideous experiences. There would just be time for the event to get into the next Saturday number.

At last Miss Minnie herself arrived, and made no demur about seeing the Commander, even as he lay in his picturesque, pink-striped pyjamas on a bed of sickness.

"My dear friend, I was greatly shocked, terribly, terribly startled," she said, taking a chair by him. "You, of all men, to be struck down! I pray it may not be as bad as you fear. Can you stand conversation?"

"I can stand yours," answered the Commander rather faintly. "If anything could delay the end, I think it would be to see and hear you. It was very good of you to come. My nerves are shattered with electricity. I was stricken last night.

My own fault entirely. My first fear was I should not live to see you again. You forgave me for writing?"

"Of course. I am glad you were well enough to write. If you can write, I should think there was every chance of your getting well again."

"Oh no, none, I fear; I couldn't write now. It was a spasmodic sort of effort. I've just had strength to finish my will—my new one—that's all. Would you mind if I got it signed and witnessed at once, while my strength holds out? The gardener and Mrs. Prescott will attest my signature. I would ask you to do so, but that is impossible."

"Why?"

"You wring it from me. I did not want you to know until I was gone. You are the principal legatee. Don't thank me or say anything. I couldn't bear it in my present state. I've nobody else in the world to think of but you. You know my feelings. I have not feared to express them to you more than once in life; now in death, so to speak, the ruling passion is strong. The sum is not much,

but in your hands it is safe. I beg you will say nothing. Press my hand—that is all I would have you do.”

Miss Minnifie, who had seen neither of the doctors, and who honestly believed that Commander Cragg was passing away, felt moved. The links with the past seemed snapping faster and faster. The bluff old mariner had filled a large space in the canvas of her later life; her own dear father had been very fond of him too. And now he was going in this awfully sudden way—going with his old love for her the ruling passion still, even in death, as he beautifully put it.

The gardener and the housekeeper witnessed Commander Cragg’s signature and then withdrew. Upon which he put the papers away with a sigh, and remained silent a considerable time.

“I’m sure I would rather you had not done anything of this sort, Commander—much rather, though your kindly remembrance of me touches me deeply,” said Miss Minnifie.

“Don’t allude to the subject again. I cannot stand it. Leave worldly matters

now. I am sure you will think kindly of me when I'm gone. Might I ask you to pour out the draught? It stands there, I believe, in a bottle in white paper. I should have drunk it sooner, but I forgot. Drugs are a mockery at a time like this; I am withered up with lightning; still we must take 'em if the doctors say so."

"These things in the hands of Heaven work wonders," said Miss Minnie. She poured out the dose and the Commander drank it off and lay back on his pillow with a feeble gasp. The medicine had been in the house for hours, but the wily Commander had delayed taking it until Miss Minnie's visit.

"From your hands," he said, answering her, "it may work wonders. Perhaps the age of miracles is not yet past."

Whatever might be the truth upon that question, certain it was that the age of strong soporifics had not passed. The Commander's vital senses now found themselves in the grip of a heroic dose of morphia, and, much to his annoyance, he felt a drowsiness beyond

his power to combat, deadening every sense. There were several things he had wanted to say, but it became impossible. In fact, I do not fancy the Commander ever learnt the exact end of that interview, and it was perhaps well that he did not. As a matter of fact, he sank into a stupor, became oblivious of his company, and, growing irritably conscious, on the threshold of sleep, that somebody was in the room, supposed it to be his housekeeper, and told her, for the love of the Lord, to pull the blind down and clear out.

“His mind is going,” said Miss Minnie to Mrs. Prescott; “the doctor should be summoned again instantly, and the clergyman. These things are always left until too late.”

Then she departed, and there was a genuine tear upon her cheek as she walked away from “Trafalgar Lodge,” for she never for an instant supposed that she would see the Commander again.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOREWARNED, FOREARMED.

UNLUCKILY for Commander Cragg, Miss Minnifie, upon her way home, met Dr. Deane, to whom she mentioned the old sailor's condition. He, however, allayed her alarm completely.

"Don't be concerned, Miss Minnifie. Dawes and myself have already seen him. There is very little the matter."

"Very little! He believes himself to be at death's door!"

"We have already explained to him that such is not the case. It suits him to let people believe so. To gain some private ends he desires to be made out extremely ill. Either that, or else his mind's giving way."

"Extraordinary! I certainly should not have visited him had I known the

circumstances. In fact, they ought to be known. He will, perhaps, be putting others in false positions too. Not ill! You really amaze me. Why, the vicar might have gone off had the rumour come to his ears. In fact, I hinted that he should be sent for. Really, I had better busy myself there, or Mr. Meadows will be going to 'Trafalgar Lodge,' and some sacrilegious travesty may be the result. Mr. Meadows would be deceived utterly, as I was. Positively, I will go to the vicarage at once. Not ill—well! I never heard of anything so extraordinary."

"You see, he's had some little upset; but nothing in the least serious," explained Dr. Deane.

"I gave him his medicine just now, before I left. He expressed a wish to have it from my hand. He seemed to sink into an incoherent condition the moment after he had drunk it—at least, very soon after."

"He naturally would do so. It was a strong opiate."

"Ah, that relieves me, for I thought he had suddenly grown worse."

“He will be perfectly well to-morrow. I say it with confidence.”

Dr. Deane smiled, took off his hat, and bid Miss Minnifie “good-evening”; but he turned and overtook her again before she had gone very far.

“A question rises in my mind which you can solve, Miss Minnifie, a question attaching to the case of the Commander: Did you give him his medicine recently? To my certain knowledge the dose must have been at ‘Trafalgar Lodge’ before mid-day.”

“I gave it to him less than an hour ago.”

“Ah! Then he must have kept it by him until you arrived.”

“Really,” said Miss Minnifie, “I’m beginning to get very angry with the man. If I thought this—”

Then she stopped, feeling that it was no business of Dr. Deane’s. After leaving him, however, she pursued her reflections. Could it be possible that the Commander had played this trick upon her with an object? Was it within the bounds of reason that he had sent for

her, even into his private apartments, with a view to letting her learn his intentions respecting his last testament, and thus securing an increased measure of her affection and regard?

“I would far sooner think that his mind was actually giving way,” reflected Miss Minnifie; “then, at least, I could respect his memory. Now, when he recovers, as of course he will, upon my word I shall almost feel called upon to cut him. Honestly, I fail to see how friendly relations will any longer be possible. As it is, I have already risked my reputation here in a way which perhaps nobody but I myself could have afforded to do. There was water in my eyes when I left him. The old man absolutely plays with one’s tenderest sensibilities.”

She went to the Vicarage and saw Mrs. Meadows, as the Vicar happened to be out. Great caution and weighing of words at all times ensued when these two ladies met and conversed; for each was in deadly fear on such occasions that she might give the other ‘something to take hold of.’

"She has such a talent for colouring the truth till it becomes the reverse—not, of course, that I judge her," said Miss Minnie on one occasion in a moment of confidence to her niece.

"It is always my object to say as little as possible on any subject when in her presence; for the woman is really Rumour with her thousand tongues." Thus had Mrs. Meadows spoken to the vicar.

So, when they met, their conversation was laconic to insufficiency; and mischief sometimes resulted; because it is quite easy to create a wrong impression by saying too little.

"Good evening, Mrs. Meadows. I have come with a message for the vicar, that is all."

"Good evening, Miss Minnie. He happens to be out just now, with our new curate, Mr. Kavanagh. Mr. Kavanagh leaves Heatherbridge, as you may have heard. But your message is safe with me."

"I am sure of it. I knew Mr. Kavanagh was going. The vicar will pre-

sently be called—at least I think so—to see Commander Cragg. All I wish is that the summons may be disregarded.”

“How curious! What is the matter at ‘Trafalgar Lodge’?”

“That’s the point. Nothing is the matter. I was misinformed—it does not signify by whom—and accordingly suggested that Mr. Meadows should be sent for. This will doubtless be done. But I have since learned from Dr. Deane that there is no cause for any alarm—no cause whatever for troubling Mr. Meadows. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly so. Won’t you come in? It is cold at night. Already I seem to feel a touch of autumn in the air, though August is not quite gone.”

“No, I thank you. I am hardly through my day’s work yet. But it certainly does grow cold at night, as you say. Good-night, Mrs. Meadows.”

“Good-night, Miss Minnifie.”

“That horrid old sailor again!” reflected Mary Meadows. “Really the woman is dead to every feminine feeling. What’s the matter now, I wonder?”

Evidently she's been taking too much upon herself as usual."

"I think," said Miss Minnifie to herself, "that she gets very little out of me. She'll puzzle her brains over that message, no doubt. But I don't fancy even she is wicked enough to twist anything definite out of it."

Then she proceeded upon her way to the last duty of the day—a duty she expected to be not easy, but which actually opened the way to one of the most sensational events of her life. Indeed that 27th of August, with the events which had passed and those which were to come, henceforth took rank in Miss Minnifie's mind as a date second only in significance to that of her father's death.

She now started to see Foster, the yellow man, Bridget's husband. She had undertaken readily enough to arrange for a meeting between the separated pair, at which the wife should definitely, by word of mouth, decline to return to her lord and master; but upon putting the position before Bridget, Miss Minnifie found herself confronted with an unex-

pected difficulty. The Irish girl's opinions were unhappily becoming changed. Whether it was that she began to grow tired of the laundry and once more yearned for the kicks and halfpence of married life, or whether it was that her contrary nature must needs always take a course directly opposite to that indicated for her by wise friends, Miss Minnie could not determine; but certainly Bridget's views of the situation were modified. The fact that Mr. Foster wanted her, and that nobody had been able to take her position in his home, appealed to Bridget's sentiment. Moreover, he was making money and living respectably. She was his wife after all, and he might so easily have filled her place; which fact she harped upon freely, much to Miss Minnie's horror. Gradually Bridget's objections to return to her husband dwindled down to nothing. From trembling at his name, she now spoke it with satisfaction. Miss Minnie had therefore shelved the question as far as possible, in hopes that a woman

who evidently suffered from such short memory and scant judgment would change her mind yet again if left alone; but now the tables were turned and Bridget began to grow importunate. She objected to being confined within the walls of the Home; she demanded the interview with her husband previously suggested by Miss Minnifie, but she declined to commit herself to any certain views or course of action at that interview. Everything, she explained, must depend upon the position Mr. Foster chose to assume. So Miss Minnifie, against her own private wish, but feeling it to be the only course, sought the yellow man once more, with intention to fix a time and place for the meeting. Mr. Foster, she knew, was getting good work and proving himself a capable layer of bricks, when sober and in the vein; but he had already worn out his welcome in Heatherbridge and made not a few enemies, notably of the throng at the "Green Man." Michael Merle was the first to decline further acquaintance with Foster, while Toby Tripe and lesser

celebrities quickly followed. I think that old Michael had been defeated once or twice in argument. Truly his views and opinions were somewhat musty, and the yellow man, when he did make a Socialistic point in conversation, was accustomed to ram it remorselessly home. The end came in the midst of a discussion upon Home Rule, and it must be recorded, not without regret, that Mr. Merle let his patriotic emotion outrun his good taste and self-control. His final argument took the form of Plymouth gin—not as an internal application, but as an outward missile.

“There b’aint none so blind as them as won’t see,” said Mr. Merle. “I be sick of puttin’ the truth afore a daft fule what shuts ’is mind to un like you. When ’e lost that heye your brains slipped out through the hole and was overlooked, I reckon.”

Upon this Foster had struck a threatening attitude, and Mr. Merle, in a moment of irritation, which he afterwards deplored, had flung the contents of his glass into his opponent’s face.

After that they ceased to be on speaking terms, but Foster had his own friends, and now he, Gregson, Charles Tripe, the poacher, and sundry other choice spirits seceded in a body from the "Green Man" and bestowed their patronage on a smaller house of bad reputation. Joe Hannaford took the matter in a philosophic spirit and never troubled himself about it. But he knew well enough that the rival hostelry was doing a very increasing business. The loafing class already alluded to spent the greater part of its time there. A certain ill-conditioned, rough element dribbled steadily into Heatherbridge and waited for the autumn and the railway to come. The youth of the town was being led away; much "pitch and toss" began to be played; an element of disorder and drink prevailed; already "Progress," as Miss Minnifie bitterly remarked, was making itself felt in undesirable directions. "The labouring class is one thing, and nobody respects it or wishes it to be considered, in moderation, more than I do," she said to that stout Liberal,

Geoffrey Browne ; “but the loafing class is another thing altogether. With them I have no sympathy; for them I have no respect.”

“Well,” he had answered, “they’ll all be hard at work pretty soon. We must be charitable.”

It is so easy to be charitable when our own corns are not trod upon. But a moment was approaching which would find Mr. Browne himself in sharp collision with the same ‘loafing class,’ for certain of them in truth meant to be ‘hard at work pretty soon’—hard at work upon an undertaking not likely to much commend itself to the master of the Priory. Fortunately for him, a lucky accident put the key of the situation into his hand; and Miss Minnie was *dea ex machina*, to her own everlasting gratification.

Through the gathering darkness she departed from the vicarage and set out for Seth Gregson’s cottage, there to beard the yellow man in his temporary den and arrange for an interview between him and Bridget. Presently she

reached the cottage to find the kitchen window open and lights and considerable noise in the apartment itself. A carouse of some sort was in progress, and Miss Minnie, entering the garden, ventured upon a cautious glance through the window before knocking at the door. She crept behind a trailing clematis and peeped in. Through clouds of tobacco and an atmosphere of beer, which filtered from the window, defiling the night, the watcher marked Seth Gregson, Charles Tripe, Foster, and three other men: two strangers, one the host of the sinister inn just mentioned. They were talking loudly, but coherently, and she stood transfixed, listening with amazement and horror to the thread of their discourse. Details and a date were evidently fixed, and now the precious party was drinking hard and getting muddled and discussing its enterprise with unnecessary lucidity. The date of it transpired again on Gregson's tongue, and then Miss Minnie, realizing that therein, so far as she was concerned, lay the egg or hatching-point of the

entire concern, gathered up her skirts, stole out of the garden, and made for the Priory as fast as her legs would carry her. She hurried along, being not in the least nervous, only exultant in a high degree. She felt on the brink of a stupendous triumph — a triumph of principle and practice. The time must now be absolutely at hand when nobody — at the vicarage or anywhere else — could even pretend to any longer doubt her significance in Heatherbridge. Her hand was on the pulse of the place; her watchful eye lost sight of no section of the community. Now she was mixing as a leader with the very best people; anon she was stripping the dirt in which they burrowed from the backs of the very worst. Really Miss Minnie felt extremely proud of herself that night. Her only sorrow centred in a deep regret that her father was not there to see and share the pending triumph.

She reached the Priory and walked slowly up the avenue, that she might arrive cool and collected. To this condition she only approximated on appearing

before Miss Nancy and the brothers Browne.

"You must forgive a call at such an hour, Mr. Browne. I am come upon no ordinary errand, really."

"Always welcome, Miss Minnifie. You'll have a cup of coffee?"

"I will; and a sandwich, if I may. I have been a long time without food. Positively I think my news is likely to startle you."

"Heatherbridge is always startling me. What is the latest?"

"It concerns your friends, the 'loafing class.' I could almost make a joke and say that they have at last found definite work, but the subject is too grave. To-night I have come into possession of some information of such a truly terrible nature that I had no choice but to hurry to you directly with it."

"D'you come as a friend to Geoffrey, or merely to approach him in his character of Justice of the Peace, Miss Minnifie?" asked James Browne.

"I come in both capacities. A monstrous breach of law and order is

threatened, and even the date is fixed for it, and you are to be the victim—or would have been excepting for Providence.”

“The facts being?” said Geoffrey.

But Miss Minnifie did not intend to dwarf the substance and dramatic effect of her information by undramatic delivery. She well knew that judicious delay much heightens the announcement of a great circumstance, and proposed accordingly to reach her climax by degrees. Now, without answering Mr. Browne, she stopped in her narrative and thanked Miss Nancy, who had herself gone out to get the sandwich and coffee, and at this moment returned with them. The visitor ate and drank; then she turned to Mr. Browne and continued,—

“You naturally ask for the facts, and I am here to give them to you in detail. One cannot be too clear in an affair of this sort. But fortunately my memory is good. You remember Seth Gregson, do you not?”

“Perfectly. He was a keeper here before I came. I didn’t like the man and didn’t want him. So I got rid of him. .

He's in bad odour. I should be glad to get him out of the place. He knows too much of the Priory woods."

"Exactly. Well, at present in the cottage Mrs. Mortmain rents to him, though she's a fool for her pains, there lives with Gregson an undesirable person—a stranger to these parts—called Foster."

"I know him, Miss Minnifie," interrupted James Browne; "he's a man one may describe as being almost picturesquely hideous. He's working now for us, up on the moorland side of the woods, building a new lofty wall."

"Quite so, and making careful mental notes of the neighbouring geography, no doubt. This man I had occasion to see to-night upon a question involving his unfortunate wife. I was just about to enter Gregson's cottage when I noticed that a great deal of light was coming from the kitchen window, and glancing in, I observed to my astonishment quite a crowd of rough men, including Foster, Gregson, your old enemy, Charles Tripe, and Barnes, that dissolute man who

belongs to the 'Wheatsheaf' public-house."

"A place that ought to be done away with," said James Browne.

"Yes, and I should think that after hearing what I have to say, you will take steps to have it done away with—the sooner the better."

"All these choice spirits were talking—eh?"

"They were. I listened for a moment at the window, almost hesitating to enter such an assembly alone, when your name struck my ear. It was Charles Tripe who uttered it, together with a disrespectful adjective—in fact, several—so, feeling that the man was an enemy to you, I considered myself justified in listening."

"Most certainly," said James.

"I should rather think so," declared Geoffrey.

"It was very well that I did. You will now be able to take action and have ample time for preparations, if indeed you let it go so far. There is a deliberate plot arranged. The ringleaders

appeared to be Gregson, Tripe and Barnes. They and others are going to break into the preserves and steal perhaps hundreds of birds. They discussed the outrage with the utmost method. They even debated about the market. Barnes knows a dealer in Exeter who asks no questions. So he said. And Foster knew another in Plymouth."

"Gad! this is news indeed," said Geoffrey Browne, rubbing his hands. "It's come to that at last, then, and Barron was right. He prophesied ages ago there would be a raid. He'll lick his lips, the old dog, when he gets more wind of it."

"Did you hear the mention of any definite night, Miss Minnifie?" inquired James Browne.

"I did: the night of the thirtieth of September. It falls on Sunday this year. That I recollected afterwards as I came along."

"Ah! And my pheasants were to make a good show in the shops on Monday morning—eh? I was to be saved the trouble of killing 'em myself—I and my party on the first?"

"Forewarned, forearmed," said Miss Minnie.

Then Geoffrey frankly and heartily thanked her, and James insisted on seeing her home.

"I cannot express my gratitude in sufficiently warm terms, I cannot indeed," declared Mr. Browne. "You have done me a service not easy to repay; but I never forget, Miss Minnie; I will repay it, should opportunity offer. Mind you, I'm in your debt; and don't you forget it. One point before you go: please not to whisper a breath—not half a syllable of this to a living soul. It is most important."

"The caution was unnecessary; not a word ever passes my lips without reason; but this I must say: I do hope there will be no bloodshed, no terrible incidents later on."

"I'm sure I pray that too," said Miss Nancy.

"You needn't fear, either of you. Now we know, we shall take proper steps; but they must be profoundly secret steps, or the cause of justice may fail at the last

moment. You are sure you won't take a glass of wine after such an exciting evening?"

Miss Minnie refused, and started for home, allowing Mr. James to escort her. And the master of the Priory wrote off that night to his son, who happened to be in Scotland for a fortnight with grouse and a friend.

"I take it you will be back to help give the blackguards a reception worthy of them," remarked the father in his communication. Geoffrey Browne was a man who rarely 'drove two horses together,' as he put it. He always had ideas on his mind and was always busy, but he never occupied himself with more than one concern at a time—that is, in so far as such a course can be followed amid the changes and chances of human affairs. He held concentration to be at the backbone of success; and now, in face of the pending raid upon his property, it was quite certain that he would busy himself with nothing less and nothing else until after the night of the thirtieth of September.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMMANDER'S REWARD.

ON Saturday morning, *Timpson's Trumpet* had a harrowing description of Commander Cragg's accident. The result was that many of his friends and acquaintances called at "Trafalgar Lodge"; and the fears of these well-wishers were much relieved when they heard that the sufferer was quite convalescent again. In fact, the electric shock appeared to have done Commander Cragg good. He told himself, but nobody else, that he felt younger for it. One circumstance caused him some uneasiness, however: Miss Minnie had not paid a second visit or even sent to inquire how he fared.

At his secret heart, the Commander felt that he had been guilty of rather extraordinary conduct; but, after all, in

love and war every method of attack is held to be admissible. Truly Commander Cragg's slight contact with his own electric wires had done him no harm whatever, though it had suggested the course of action which we have seen he followed. He had long wanted to acquaint Miss Minnie with his testamentary intentions respecting her, and he seized the opportunity of doing so as from a bed of sickness. Now he felt rather anxious to see her again, and, but that such a course would proclaim his flagrant deception, the Commander might have started off upon his tricycle as usual two days after his catastrophe. This, however, he dared not do, but he saw the different friends who called, and endeavoured to get some information of the lady in every quarter possible.

Major Bird and his wife paid a visit on Saturday afternoon, and had a chat with the sufferer.

"I wasn't a bit surprised, Commander," declared the Major. "My wonder is the thing didn't happen sooner. On your own showing, when we came to look at

the affair, it was a sort of death-trap."

"There is no doubt, my dear Bird, that I have been at death's door. I have seen death face to face," said the Commander gravely. But people had already heard from the doctors that things were not as bad as the old sailor imagined or desired they should be thought.

"I hope you'll be humane, Commander, and have your invention removed now. Even a burglar is a fellow-creature, I'm sure you would not like anybody else to suffer as you have suffered," said Mrs. Bird.

"I certainly think I shall have it removed," he answered. "Most men would have died upon the spot. Only my iron constitution pulled me through. Miss Minnie came to see me. I thought I was dying, of course, or I should not have asked her to do so. I think she was rather shocked."

"At being asked to come, d'you mean?"

"No, no; of course not: at my appearance. I believe I was horribly shattered

to look at. It is wonderful how I have picked up again. Did she mention the matter to you?"

"No, Commander. We rarely meet. She is such a busy woman. But, as you say, it must have been a great shock to her. She and you are such friends—a regular platonic attachment I always call it."

The sailor made an inaudible sound and changed the subject.

"I hope your affairs—I mean your daughter's are all right again, Mrs. Bird. I have not seen you to say what I thought. I couldn't have believed it. No more news of the man—that curate, I mean?"

"None, Commander. He has passed out of our lives. I heard from Mrs. Watford recently. She has taken a little, snug house in Kent, and wants me and Minnie to spend a fortnight with her later on. We probably shall do so. She doesn't mention his name, and I gather that the cloud must be lifting, for the tone of the note is fairly bright. She is throwing herself into religious matters more deeply than ever."

“Um! I should have thought a little lay society would have come as a wholesome change. And young Watford? I was sorry for him. It's hard to have a silver or a gold spoon snatched out of your mouth as he had.”

“He is doing well, and getting on famously. He wrote to Minnie recently that he had had further success. I think he is very well thought of. Really literature appears to be a possible profession for a young man nowadays.”

“Why couldn't Mrs. Watford give him an income and have done with it? She has plenty of money.”

“My dear Commander, the same idea struck the Major; but I'll tell you what I told him: people don't do that sort of thing in every-day life.”

Soon afterwards, expressing great satisfaction that their friend was not so seriously ill as he and they had supposed, the Birds departed, just before the arrival of another caller. This proved to be Mr. Thompson Cooper, the farmer; and he brought with him some decidedly irritating information. Mr. Cooper was a

gossip of the highest rank, and now, upon finding his friend fairly robust, detailed, for his benefit, certain recent conversations at the club—conversations of a sort to discomfort the subject of them not a little.

“Of course I don’t want to worry you, Cragg, or carry tales about. I’ve got some credit for discretion, I think. I dare say my articles on agricultural subjects in *Timpson’s Trumpet* have proved that. But we’re friends, and there are things which you ought to hear being said about you behind your back. D’you mind smoke in this room?”

The Commander said he did, but invited Mr. Cooper to come into the garden, and then gave him one of his own cigars.

“You know what that cad Parkhouse is? Well, the venomous little brute’s never tired of sneering at you now; and the visitors at the club—the temporary residents—have joined in. You’re simply a joke, Cragg. I’m mad about it, so’s Browne. There ought to be a Committee Meeting.”

"There shall be, and devilish smartly too, when I'm about again. I'll get Parkhouse turned out of the club. I don't care two pins for the scandal or anything. I'll get him turned out, and that will wreck the miserable book he's writing too."

"Browne tackled him again recently, and asked him how it came about that a man who called himself a philosopher could behave like an old maid over all the little twopenny-halfpenny bits of gossip in the place. Then Parkhouse brought out all his old rot and rubbish about units making up the community and communities making up the nation, and so on. You know the stuff."

"I do. I should have thought that Dawes and you and Browne and Bird could have smashed him between you."

"Well, I hate to talk, but it's only right you should know. After all, a man's got to fight his own battles. The truth is that Bird enjoys the joke—the stupid joke against you—as much as anybody. Between you and me and the gatepost, Bird's infernally treacherous. And,

candidly, Dawes isn't your friend, either, Commander. He even sneers at your illness itself. He said he understood that Miss Minnie was nursing you. It's so blackguard low that sort of fun, and so unprofessional. I'm really thankful you'll be among us again soon. Of course you won't take any notice of anything I've said. We're simply friends talking, but I'm not going to see any man made a fool of behind his back and not strike a blow for him."

Of course, nobody had cackled louder at the old sailor's expense than the speaker.

"We want straight hitting in this affair, Cooper, and we'll have it. Such news as this is enough to make some men have a relapse. After the time I've spent on that club! I'm getting an old beggar now, too. It's a damned shame, and I feel it, I tell you. So shall other people. SOMEBODY may have his conceited nose pulled before he is many days older; and his name begins with a D. He behaved like a simple fool when he came to see me. I've done with him now, at any

rate. I believe the other man, Deane's worth fifty of him, whatever people say. And I shall tell him that and one or two other things the first time I see him."

"Quite right too. Of course my name won't be mentioned. Not that I shall hesitate to stand by you."

Then, having invited the Commander to Barrow Hurst Burrows, Mr. Cooper went on his way, feeling that he had done well in thus acquainting his friend with the base things which were being uttered and believed behind his back.

These outrageous facts hastened the Commander's recovery considerably. He was not the man to stop at home when his so-called friends were all laughing at him abroad. Besides, the Minnie problem needed some immediate solution. So, upon the following day, the old sailor sent for a cab, designing first to call at "Myrtle Cottage" and then to proceed to the club.

Miss Minnie was in, and not doubting that her mistress would see the visitor, a maidservant admitted the Commander before the lady whom he came to visit

had quite decided whether he should have an interview or not. He walked in, making great show of using his stick, and trying to look ill and interesting, but not attaining to any measure of success.

"Don't think I'm a ghost," he said, holding out his hand with a smile that was meant to imply indomitable pluck fighting against great physical disadvantages.

"It would be quite impossible to mistake you for anything of the sort," said Miss Minnifie, bowing stiffly, and not taking the hand extended to her. .

The Commander thought it might be best not to see her evident annoyance.

"It's been an absolute resurrection from the dead. And frankly I think you're the cause of it. Your visit was the turning-point. It was the touch of an angel's wing, as the poet remarks."

"Not at all. It was the touch of a strong dose of morphia. You will pardon me for saying that I consider you behaved with great lack of self-control."

"I did? Bless your heart, a man don't

study etiquette on the edge of the grave, does he?"

"You were not upon the edge of the grave or anywhere near it. You behaved as though you were, but you were not all the time."

"I know jolly well I was—else I shouldn't have thought of sending for you."

"Two medical men told you there was really nothing the matter. You should have believed them."

"On the contrary, before they left I convinced them I was ill. They admitted it. They had to. Deane came afterwards and found me in a deep slumber. As to Dawes, I believe I shall bring an action."

"All I can say is you have regained your health in a most remarkable manner."

"Really you talk as if you were rather sorry, Miss Minnie."

"Believe me, I am very thankful that there was nothing the matter after all; but rumours are abroad, and others have suffered besides yourself—indeed, more

than yourself. I have been mentioned—of course owing to that ridiculous visit.”

“It wasn’t ridiculous from my point of view.”

“Nor from mine—at the time. Now I confess I think I have just cause for complaint. You are so self-opinionated. You ought not to have sent for me. Heatherbridge is laughing. Not that I care for that, but still it seems unsatisfactory that a woman in my position here should be the butt of common laughter.”

“I’ll make some of them laugh on the wrong side of their mouths, and jolly soon too. Weak though I am, I intend to have a word to say. The age of chivalry has not quite gone by, though you may think it has, Miss Minnie. Things have come to a fine pass here when a lady of your position—a defenceless woman—is attacked and insulted by people who should know better too.”

“As to that, Commander, I don’t really see how you can separate yourself from the amusement caused at my expense—if such there has been. Honestly,

it appears to me that you are to blame. Chivalry is very well, but I would certainly ask you to let the matter drop now. The less *you* say about it the better. There has been a disgusting tendency to couple our names for the last six or eight months. We know where it originated, but that is neither here nor there. The fact remains, that, thanks to you, there has been very good ground for this gossip—better ground really than many rumours have. A step must be taken. The time has come for me to speak, and I think it would be well if you went away for a change. Your—your recent attack, or accident, or whatever it really was, would be amply sufficient excuse. If you were away for, say, a couple of months or longer, these reports might die a natural death. Then, upon your return, we could take mutual care that our relations were of a nature to excite no future comment. If you consider, you will see I am right.”

And this after all the poor Commander had done ! He had perpetrated his elaborate deception for this ; for this he had ar-

ranged a medical consultation and kept his bed ; for this he had bequeathed his savings and his patents and pretty nearly all that he had to Mercy Minnie. Instead of gaining ground by the performance, he had lost even the remote chance of future triumph he might ever be said to have possessed. He looked very glum indeed now, and did not answer immediately.

“ Well, you’re frank—there’s no denying that,” he said, after a pause. “ I’ve been spoken to straight enough before to-day, but never so straight as that. So you want me to clear out, up anchor and be off? And that in face of what you wrung from me last week ! I’m hurt—’pon my soul, I’m wounded. You’re a flint to me.”

“ Really you are an impossible person to deal with at times, Commander. I have the greatest difficulty in realizing your age. You can’t see, or you won’t see. I’m thinking as much of you as myself when I make the suggestion that you should have change of air ; and as to the other affair, I must absolutely decline to admit that I wrung any in-

formation from you at all. You told me what you had done, and I merely contented myself then with saying I didn't like it, because I thought you were dying and it was no good worrying you. If you wish to please me, you will go straight home and burn that will. And I do not think I'm a flint in my relations with anybody."

"Ah, you may pack me off, but you can't stop my feelings coming out. I shan't touch that will."

"I appeal to you nevertheless to alter it. The whole affair is a farce and very derogatory—very much so indeed to both of us. If you really died, I should suffer extremely when your testament came to be known."

"It's rather a pity you let yourself believe all you hear, Miss Minnie," said the Commander, suddenly changing his ground. "It amounts to this, that you believe Deane or Dawes rather than me. Of course I bow to your ruling. I'm not quite so welcome as I used to be when your dear father was alive. I've seen that some time. I'd hoped though

to still enjoy your society and your friendship. I thought that people of a certain age could meet frankly and freely and outrage no conventions. It seems I was wrong. Perhaps it is rather a pity that I did not die. Then I imagine that even this charitable community would have been silent. I will take care not to offend again anyway."

"People are censorious."

"Quite so. I've been jolly careful not to give 'em a chance myself. But there's always a crew ready to jump on a man when he's down. I must be off now. I heard yesterday of various things that have been said. I've got a bone to pick with a few men here. Let one turn his back on other people, even for a day or so, and somebody will bite it for certain. However, I have a tongue in my head, thank God."

"The best answer to many falsehoods is none at all."

"That depends on the liar. Brutes like Parkhouse wouldn't understand silence."

"And yet silence is golden, they say, Commander."

"It may be so when you're dealing with big minds. Silence is weakness if you know that it's safe to be misinterpreted. I'll go now. You'll see me before I leave Heatherbridge. Yes, I shall probably take your advice and disappear and mope all alone in some out-of-the-way hole for a couple of months or more. It has even struck me that I might leave altogether. I'm an unpopular old man. Nobody likes me. Blessed if I know how it is."

"You use the word 'mope.' Don't mope, Commander. Indeed I need not advise you, for I am sure you will be active wherever you go. Change is always so good. I design to spend a week in Exeter myself later on. But at present my hands are very full. Of course you'll come back sooner or later."

So the Commander went off to say a word or two at the club. The interview with Miss Minnie had depressed him considerably, but he really deemed her advice rather good. It occurred to him that a couple of months at sea might produce fine results. He began to fear that after all this extraordinary woman

was not for him. It seemed almost impossible to imagine, since their recent conversation, that even the germ of any personal affection for him existed in her breast. "She just barely tolerates me now," he reflected, "and there'll be an open row if I don't make myself scarce for a bit. It isn't so much her fault as that of all the cursed busybodies in this gossiping little bee-hive of a place. If people could only be let alone to pursue their private affairs *in private!*" With which aspiration the Commander entered the club in fine fighting trim.

Nothing of a racy nature can be chronicled, however, as the day chancing to be very fine, the institution was empty. Commander Cragg therefore contented himself with discharging on the spot a boy in buttons, who officiated as billiard-marker. This he did because the boy grinned with his back turned, and the Commander saw this vulgar amusement reflected in a looking-glass over the mantelpiece. Then the invalid drove home, and had the satisfaction of cutting Surgeon Dawes upon the way. He

knew that Dawes always demanded an explanation if anybody cut him, so this was a preliminary to future conversation.

To return for one moment to Miss Minnifie, it must be admitted that her assertion of press of business was most true. The great event of the pending poaching raid had now gone out of her hands into others well able to deal with it; but the shadow of the matter filled her thoughts, and the more so because, with the exception of Miss Browne, there was nobody to whom she could speak upon the subject. She waited her time, however, knowing that her triumph was sure after the event. But an awkward matter arose from the present necessity for silence. She held it as now impossible to allow Bridget any intercourse with Mr. Foster, and she feared it was equally impossible to tell her the reason. "One of two things will happen," thought Miss Minnifie, after a rather heated interview with the Irishwoman; "either she will be as good as her word and run away and join him, or else my efforts to

temporize until the end of the month will succeed. When this miserable man, with his companions, all fall together, as they must do presently, then Bridget will realize her merciful escape." Miss Minnie had said as much as she dared, had even hinted dark things of Mr. Foster to his wife, but when Bridget pressed for details, none of a definite character were forthcoming. The fact that her husband had low democratic instincts and never went to church, and was a standing menace to society generally, naturally weighed nothing with Bridget against the other fact that he was getting good wages and wanting his wife. Finally the woman made up her mind to return to him, and now only awaited a fitting opportunity. Her choice of day and hour fell at a sensational moment, as shall appear; but first, not to overrun events, a word may be said upon the subject of the secret preparations at the Priory. Of all the gamekeepers the taciturn Barron alone was informed of what had to be expected, and he asked for no better assistant than Fred Browne.

That young man cut short his Scotch sport and came home to prepare for some amusement of a rather more exciting nature. Mr. Geoffrey Browne long debated whether it would be better to arrest the conspirators at once, but only a few could be pointed at with certainty, and proof was wanting to effectively deal with any of them. So he left the plan of defence to Fred and the experienced Barron. The latter gentleman excelled himself and organized a masterly scheme with which it was hoped the poachers would fall in. Every possibility had due consideration given to it. Nothing was left to chance. The point to be guarded—the spot at which the enemy must be met—was fortunately known, for the pheasants patronized a certain extended district in the Priory woods. Here the keepers and other defenders would be gathered and secreted at some convenient centre. Scouts were to be stationed on every line from which the enemy could approach; and thus it was assumed that Barron's force would be able to concentrate in ample time at the

point where it might be most needed. Mr. Browne's hope and ambition was to capture the gang to a man.

"And we did ought to do it if we keeps our mouths shut and don't tell the police," said Barron to Fred. "There won't be no more than ten or a dozen of 'em, 'cause it wouldn't pay more, and they'd also be afeared of getting blown on. Say a dozen. If we works with fifteen or sixteen good 'uns—real good 'uns—we're all right."

Barron also strongly begged that he might be allowed the selection of his force, and advised that such choice should not be made until the last moment.

"Once let a breath get out and they'll vanish, like a puff of smoke or rats up a drain—the whole crew of 'em. You might get good 'andy gents, and they'd do their best, sir; but when a man's fighting with a chance for freedom and the certainty of a year's quod if he's took, he'll lay about him and hit hard—see? I don't want men as 'll need help, but chaps equal to the job, and not to be beat by the chance of a charge of small shot

in their bellies. You know how I lost them fingers, don't you, Mister Fred? Well, gents wouldn't like to go through life as I have, minus a bit or two. You're all right, though there's a deal too much of you to let fly at; but I know you'll do your share. Only don't be soft-hearted, and don't mind hitting. Then the master. For God's sake make him stay at home. He's got pluck enough for ten men, but he'll be sorely in the way, and oughtn't to come."

"He'll come, Barron, and nothing I could do or anybody could do would prevent it. He'd tackle them if he had to do it alone," said Fred. "As to help," he continued, "I've taken your hint and only got two men besides myself. One's Challis—a wonder I met in Scotland. He was amateur wrestling champion of England last year, and stands three inches taller than I do. The other's young Bird here. He's all right for scouting, and I want particularly to do him a favour in exchange for some lessons in fly-fishing he gave me last season."

Barron merely grinned.

"I hope the young gent 'll be properly grateful. But it ain't going to turn out a evening party exactly—leastways, I don't think so."

"One man's meat is another man's poison, Barron. I could get fifty fellows I know who would pay a 'fiver' apiece and more to be allowed to help us. It's a privilege for any chap to be really faced with a bit of fighting in these milk-and-watery times. I'm feeling just like it myself. I've been 'spoiling' for a row for months."

"I hopes nobody won't get more than they wants, that's all," said Barron. "Not that some of the other varmin won't, sure as death. And mind you hits, if you've got to hit. Lay it on all you know. You can't kill a poacher, and it don't overmuch matter if you do."

CHAPTER X.

ON BEHALF OF THE PRIORY PHEASANTS.

By divers entrances and in small parties, Barron's force strolled through the Priory woods when twilight glimmered grey amongst the trunks of the pines on the last night of September. The greater number of the best people were already at evening prayer in the churches; Miss Minnifie and Miss Browne were sitting together at the parish church. A secret bond of sympathy drew them together, and both prayed heartily enough for the party under the pine trees, but they cannot be said to have followed the service with their usual attention.

Mr. James Browne stopped at home. He was honestly glad that Barron had no need of his services; but Geoffrey insisted upon going into the woods. The

master of the Priory fortunately took a liking to Fred's athletic and gigantic friend—the wrestler; and this youth was therefore privately told off by Fred as a special body-guard for his parent. He and Tim Bird undertook to act as scouts, each stationing himself at a spot about a mile distant from the fir plantations where operations were expected to centre. Their duty was to return to the main body upon the first indication of the enemy, but on no account to show themselves or frighten the approaching gang. During the morning Barron had acquainted all his under-keepers—with a single exception. This man, one next in command to himself, he rather distrusted.

“And don't none of you open your mouths to Blake,” he had said. “He's off duty to-night, but it wouldn't surprise me tremendous if we found him on the wrong side. If you does so, it don't much matter how damned hard you hits him—see?” The rest had assured their chief that he made himself quite plain. Blake was unpopular, and nobody would regret the opportunity to pay old scores. Three

of the Priory gardeners were also enlisted on the morning of the event, and four friends of Barron's—men who had helped him at a pinch in the North Country—were specially communicated with and arrived on Saturday night. The party, numbering eighteen men in all, was posted quietly and silently in position before the last rays of daylight fled. Fortunately the evening was fine and dry. The opening watches of the night promised to be very dark, but a waning moon would rise at an hour when it was calculated its beams might prove invaluable. The keepers carried their guns, but Fred and his friends trusted to stout sticks. Fred indeed had a noble black-thorn; and now, as he sat in some bracken, hard by a little clump of horse-chestnuts that grew on the edge of the Priory woods, he wondered whose skull, if anybody's, his formidable club was destined to crack that night. Below the hillock on which he was stationed, meadow-land sank away to the main road. It was a point at which the woods were easily assailable, either from the open

moorland above or the town below. The autumn gold of the bracken was already dying to sere brown, but it made a comfortable couch enough, and Fred, with a good supper inside him and plenty of tobacco in his pouch, felt happier than he had done for a long time. Something pressed into his side as he stretched out and made himself a bed on the broken fern. It proved to be a pair of handcuffs in his pocket. By private arrangement with the Governor of Exeter gaol—a friend of Mr. Browne's—two dozen pairs of iron bracelets had been sent to the Priory; and every man was to-night provided with at least one pair. Fred shifted the handcuffs, smoked his pipe and thought of Marian Deane. He had decided to speak once more, and once only. He felt much better for this decision, and only awaited an early opportunity to put it in practice.

The night was very dark, but starry. An owl hooted hard by, and a distant one answered him; from time to time, with noise intensified by the silence, ripe horse-chestnuts came tumbling rap-tap through

the lofty boughs above and thud upon the ground below ; small things rustled and moved about him, and he heard the rabbits scurrying in and out of the bracken to and from the meadow. Once, sweet-smelling, with snorting nostrils and steamy cloud of breath, a sleepless cow from the meadows shambled almost on top of him, then galloped off in no little amazement. Presently twelve o'clock trembled in a murmur on the air from the church tower five miles off. The night wind blew shrewdly ; Orion was rising, and to the east of him, low on the edge of the black world, glimmered a reddish light like a far-distant fire, but it was only the coming moon. Fred rather wished he had brought a railway rug, for the circumstances of the case made it necessary to keep still and take no exercise. He felt cold and stiff and longed for some excitement. Then an incident occurred, for in the great stillness, not to be mistaken for wind or night-bird, came the sound of human footsteps walking briskly and sharply, as though bent upon no uncertain errand. The watcher rose to his

knees in the fern and strained his ears. It was too dark to see anything, but he knew a narrow way ran through the meadows from an entrance to the forest lower down. This track, known as the "Woodman's Path," was Priory property, and led up to the moor on the one side and through the covers past the Poacher's Pool on the other. Fred listened, but the steps had already grown faint. He rose and, bending low, crept down over the meadow to the path. Somebody had passed, but whether to or from the woods he could not say. He thought it must have been one of the gang on his way to the woods, and therefore stole forward with the utmost caution, hoping every moment to get within earshot of the footsteps again, but no sound of anything human rewarded him, and at length he came to the conclusion that he was mistaken. Another watcher was stationed near the Poacher's Pool, and Fred dared not desert his own post on the chance of overtaking one individual and perhaps ruin everything by beginning the battle and spreading an alarm too soon. Here again an error of

judgment begot mighty issues—mighty at least to the persons concerned. Fred had in truth heard footsteps, and if, instead of going to the woods, he had turned the other way and followed the path to the moorland, he must have overtaken them, at a cost to himself only to be calculated in the light of future events.

Meanwhile Tim Bird was spending hours of vigil by the incomplete wall already mentioned—a spot on which the yellow man and others had been recently at work and a place at present offering easy access to the preserves. He too heard the manifold sounds of night, blistered his mouth with many pipes of tobacco, rubbed his legs vigorously from time to time to keep away cramp, and longed for the tramp of footsteps and hushed mutter of voices which would send him flying through the woods upon his errand to the main party.

Companionship made time fly faster with Mr. Geoffrey Browne, Tom Challis, the wrestling champion, and most of the rest. Moreover they had more comfort-

able quarters than the scouts. It happened that in the centre of the pines there stood a wood-stack, and this the wily Barron and his friends had, that morning, busied themselves with. Now a considerable hollow was fashioned within it—a hollow large enough to receive the party. It was proposed on the first note of warning that everybody should scramble into this innocent-looking concern and not emerge until the enemy was right upon them. Some of the band were now within the wood-stack and others sat outside or walked about. There was no necessity for present silence, as at least one of the outposts must become aware of any approach and bring ample notice of it. Barron prowled round with his friends, conversing in brief sentences and laughing silently over past reminiscences; several men sat in a cluster and smoked outside the stack; others were within it, listening in respectful silence to Mr. Browne's remarks. Mr. Challis also vouchsafed curious information on the subject of the different styles in wrestling, and the catch-as-catch-

can variety in particular. It was his only subject. The time dragged on; a lop-sided moon, seen fiery red through the pine trunks, grew silvery as it ascended above their crowns; a ripple of soft light came flooding down into the forest, streaking the straight pines with ribbons of silver, marking out the clearings in wan patches of brightness barred with shadows, dimly defining the vastness that lay around. And above, under the boughs that sloped gently downwards, snug, warm in their handsome raiment, ignorant that the first day of October had already come and would be trembling to dawn anon, reposed the Priory pheasants—dozens and dozens of them—perched in close company, sleeping the innocent sleep of unconscious existence.

“Master’s agin battoo shootin’, and that’s a good job too, but maybe he’ll have some this night. Not that I wants to kill no man, but there’s old scores and old sores. A poacher’s a poacher—see? One took two fingers off my paw. Well, and if there’s a chance of being

quits to-night 'tishn't 'uman nature to miss it."

Barron thus discoursed for the benefit of his friends, and they gave it as a good maxim in these cases to fire low and remember that, if the worst comes to the worst, there is such a legal phrase as 'justifiable homicide.'

"Vermin's vermin, whether it flies or creeps or walks on two legs upright. An' powder'n shot's the only cure that's left to use," said somebody. Then they discussed the man-trap, the spring gun, and other atrocious engines; and so the night stole slowly on towards day. At last, however, about two o'clock in the morning, came definite news. A party of men—how many it was impossible to say—had entered the plantations at a point near Seth Gregson's cottage. One of the younger keepers brought the intelligence.

"There was a tidy crowd of 'em, and they sneaked in so quiet and so sudden that I'd not a second to make tracks, but lay still as a hare in form right under their feet a'most. Then I took a turn out of

their road and slipped along sharp as I could. They'll come by way of the Hazel Bottom and the Old Well. And I'll swear I heard Blake's voice. I'll take my oath of that."

Everybody crowded into the wood-stack or stuck close to it on the side where the moonlight threw a shadow. It was hoped the poachers would come thus far in a body. If they did, all might be suddenly surprised and overpowered; but if they scattered, which was also probable, a few at least would be likely to escape. Now pipes were out and not a sound audible ten yards from the stack.

Then, away towards the Hazel Bottom and growing louder, came a rustle and a murmur and a snap, and crackle of breaking twigs under heavy feet, together with a curious sharp sound, often repeated. Presently dim shapes took substance out of the moonlight. An irregular and scattered company, going slowly along and keeping within an area of fifty yards, was approaching, and it had already begun to work. The jarring,

jerking report of air guns struck on the ears of the listeners. Again and again they were repeated ; and after each discharge came hurried flutterings and the cry of cock pheasants and many a thud on the ground, that made Geoffrey Browne tremble with passion. But Barron almost held the little man down until the poachers were within twenty yards ; and then, when two already stood mopping their heads in the cleared space before the stack, like a flash of lightning the signal was given, and the silent woods echoed with war.

“Mark your men, boys ! Don’t miss one of the devils !” roared Barron, and before the words were out of his mouth he had already grappled with the nearest man in the open. Geoffrey Browne, as arranged, fired a gun at the outset of the battle as a signal to the scouts. It meant that their services would now be required at the seat of war ; and the sound echoing afar, started five stout runners, thankful to hear it, from their lonely posts. Fred and Tim were amongst them, and each as he sped along kept a look-out for possible

fugitives. Fred longed for a hand-to-hand encounter; Tim did not particularly court such a thing, but was well prepared to face it if Fate thrust it upon him.

Meanwhile two hostile bodies of men, fairly matched, were fighting in earnest. Barron's first antagonist was his former colleague, Blake, and that worthy, not showing fight, was promptly handcuffed and left in the tender charge of Mr. Browne, who undertook to watch prisoners. Challis, forgetful of his trust, got into holds with a loutish navvy nearly as big as himself. The man had already hit his foe over the forearm with the stock of an air gun, but once in the wrestler's clutches, a very tidy back fall, which landed him with his head on the stump of a tree, reduced the fighting-force of the midnight sportsmen by one. At the same time Gregson had knocked down a keeper and run for it.

"One go after—you, Jim!" shouted Barron.

Jim instantly relinquished his own task and followed the fugitive at his best pace. Then Barron got an ugly wipe over the

muzzle and returned it with interest, bringing his man down in a heap. The poachers scattered as far as it was possible; and when two or three of Barron's men presently found themselves disengaged, the difficulty was to know where their help was most needed. The noise and curses and din of battle, from being concentrated at a point, now covered a wide area. Four of the poachers, one insensible, lay handcuffed at Mr. Browne's feet, and two of his own men sat at hand, one in a bad way. Barron had disappeared; cries and yells rose here and there, then far away in the woods a gun fired. Presently three more men in handcuffs were added to the others, and Challis arrived, dragging an inert, insensible lump after him, which proved to be no less a person than Mr. Foster.

"I've killed the poor devil, I'm afraid. He fired at me and wouldn't give in, and I got angry and hit him," he explained.

The yellow man truly presented a paltry picture. His glass eye had dropped out; he was perfectly insensible and to all appearance as dead as a man

need be. Again came the sound of a distant gun and cries for help broke out at the same moment from a point not far off.

“That’s somebody hard pressed!” shouted Mr. Browne, and the gigantic Challis set forth once more. Half-a-dozen desperate hand-to-hand battles were still raging, and one in particular was nearly decided against the cause of law and order. Barron had cornered Charles Tripe, and he, with recent experiences fresh in his memory, was making a fight for liberty. Both had lost their sticks, and were fighting with their fists. Tripe had just got one home—a heavy blow that came with a sickening thud on the keeper’s nose and sent the blood spurting. Seizing his advantage, Tripe landed another and then closed, falling with Barron under him. Then, in red-hot passion, roused by the blood and the former recollection of a losing battle with this man, he hit again and again into the other’s battered face, till Barron at last got his arms up and, with a twist, wriggled free. Tripe rose quicker than his foe and was just off,

when the other gripped him by the ankle and held on. There was a curse and a brutal kick in the ribs that cracked something, but Barron still held on and his man came down on top of him again. That was the turning-point. The keeper, almost beat, managed to get hands on to Mr. Tripe's throat and dig his thumbs in Mr. Tripe's windpipe with a pressure sufficient for the purpose. In fact he nearly choked the life out of the man, and would probably have done so altogether but that a comrade came to the keeper's aid and took charge of his gasping foe. They were a striking pair; Barron, with streams of blood, black under the moonlight, running over his face, hanging with a sort of blind bulldog determination to the other's throat; Tripe in the jaws of death—his tongue rolling out, his eyes bulging.

Down in the woods one of the Priory gardeners had two men upon him and was getting badly mauled. It had been each for himself among the poachers, but in this case one had turned to help the other. Barnes, the proprietor of the

objectionable inn, seeing his chance, hit this unfortunate gardener on the back of the head, and the man, with a cry for help, turned to face his new enemy. But he only got another crack across the neck for his pains, and was down on his knees, like a felled bullock, when the redoubtable Challis once more appeared, just as Barnes made off after his companion. Mr. Challis was not very fleet of foot, but no more was Barnes. For a quarter of a mile they struggled and crashed through the woods, pursuer keeping pursued in sight. Then Barnes nearly knocked his brains out against a tree-trunk, and before he could get under weigh again the other was on him. Both were blown, but Challis knew the value of fourteen stone at a crisis, and simply bore the baffled Barnes to the ground, falling on him and lying there till the innkeeper gurgled out that he was being killed. One more scene of that serious battle needs to be described. Tim Bird, to his own surprise, reached headquarters before Fred was heard of. He had come through the woods without adventure, but now set to work to help

where it was most needed. Just after assisting Barron, or rather, as it proved, saving the partially strangled Tripe, he dragged that hero to the savage handcuffed party presided over by Mr. Browne, and as he did so, a woman's scream, clear as a bell, rang out above the now receding sounds of conflict. There was no mistaking it; the cry came from the same direction in which a gun had recently fired, the direction of the Poacher's Pool. Tim set off as hard as he could gallop, but fortunately for those in trouble, others were far nearer to the scene of action. One of Barron's North Country friends had just missed his man in some undergrowth of rhododendrons. Hearing the scream also, he turned and was on the spot from whence it proceeded in time to be of some exceptional service.

To treat the incident as it deserves, one must return to Fred Browne. Upon the welcome sound of gun-fire echoing in the forest, he had risen from his lair and started in a straight line for the wood-stack, but finding progress through the heavy undergrowth to be slow, he

made a sharp detour and struck the "Woodman's Path," which was like to lengthen his journey, but would, for all that, enable him to reach his friends and foes in a shorter time. Upon this path, after half his race was run, Fred came bang into Seth Gregson. He, knowing the woods better than his first pursuer, had given that individual the slip, and now, gun in hand and none the worse for his adventure, was just congratulating himself upon his escape and the gratifying circumstance that he at least had broken one head.

He recognized Fred, and tried to dive off the footpath into the shadow, but the other was too quick.

"Stop!" shouted young Browne; "stop and give up that gun, and save yourself a hiding now as well as what you'll get later."

"Let me pass," answered Gregson, glowering at him and holding his gun ready to fire. "Let me go by, or it'll be the worse for you. S'help me God, I'll shoot if you touches—"

Before he got any further, Fred, think-

ing to get at close quarters and inside the muzzle of the gun before the poacher could fire it, dashed at him. Had he been a quarter of a second sooner his object must have been gained and the gun would have exploded harmlessly over his head. As it was, his left shoulder just caught the rim of the discharge. Half-a-dozen shot entered it, with a sting and a pang like the stab of red-hot knives, and his coat was set on fire by the explosion. At the same moment Fred had hit straight and hard with his right, catching Gregson on his blue chin and dropping him where he stood. But the man was only unconscious for a few seconds, and when he recovered he found Fred kneeling beside him with his coat still smouldering at the shoulder and one arm apparently useless, hanging limp, with blood trickling in several streams out of the sleeve over his hand. His face was white in the moonlight, but he had used the moments of the poacher's unconsciousness to some purpose; for Gregson found as he prepared to rise that he was handcuffed

—handcuffed by the left wrist to Fred's right hand.

“Get up and be quick, and thank the Lord you missed murder,” said Fred. “Come, I say, don't show fight again, or I'll shoot you through the head.”

He made as though he had a pistol in his pocket, but even had that been the case he could not have used it, for his right hand was occupied, his left was quite useless. Gregson, however, was not able to realize this fact, and he followed without speaking, while Fred made the best of his way to the wood-stack. He knew he was losing a deal of blood from his shoulder, and began to feel weaker every moment, but he increased the pace and staggered along with the silent poacher chained to him. Having followed the path a hundred yards or so until he reached the spot at which it ran abreast of the Poacher's Pool, young Browne's strength suddenly gave out. He made one attempt to cry aloud for help, and then came down with a crash in a dead faint and dragged the astounded Gregson on to his knees at the

same time. The poacher doubted not that Fred Browne was dead, and a sense of the horror of his own position, chained thus to his victim, brought wild terror to his heart for a moment. Once he tore at the handcuff like a madman, but there was no getting away from the heavy motionless thing fastened to the other end. Then he collected his wits and huddled close to Fred and hastily grabbed in his pockets for the handcuff key which must be in them. But he only smeared his hands with warm blood and could not find the key. There was but one other way of getting free, and the great brute, still dazed from the heavy blow he had himself received recently, now put his unrestrained hand from Fred's pockets into his own and fumbled for a knife. He found one, opened it with his teeth and nerved himself to cut the wrist of his silent enemy. His life, for all he knew, was the alternative; so Mr. Gregson hesitated but a moment. Then it was that, as he turned, the moonlight, which silvered the Poacher's Pool and gleamed in the pale petals of a late lily that

still floated there, flashed along the edge of his jack-knife too, whereupon a woman's scream broke on his ear; somebody stood between him and the moonlight, and firm fingers seized his arm. The woman knew nothing of what was to happen just then. She could not guess who lay low in the heather by the path; she did not know that an iron link was fastening these men; but she saw a knife raised, and so lifted her voice again and again and held with all her force to the brawny arm whose hand grasped the blade. Even at that moment the woman thanked God for sending her into the Priory woods that night; and all the time she held on to Seth Gregson's arm and ceased not to scream with might and main. She was strong and young, and though his legs were free and he managed to kick the girl and bruise her, forcing her down against a granite boulder and jamming his weight against her, yet the poacher, handicapped as he was, could not get free of her in time to complete his purpose; and aid arrived before his new opponent, with her dress dragged nearly

off her back, breathless and disordered and at her last gasp, succumbed and was savagely thrown back down a bank into the gorse. But the blow which freed him of her was Mr. Gregson's last. A man had come upon the scene, and he, seeing the position, did not hesitate to use his stick and render the poacher harmless, as one might beat over the head a mad dog. Then others arrived, among them Tim and Challis. They found two men lying side by side, linked each to the other and both to all appearances dead. Nor could they be separated instantly. By the time the key was found in young Browne's pocket he had recovered consciousness, but was too weak to move or do more than whisper. Then Challis discovered the seat of the trouble in Fred's shoulder. The blood had clotted in some measure and the flow was dwindling, but Fred had lost more than anybody could say, and his condition appeared very serious. Nobody had bestowed much thought on his preserver, and now she appeared among the men, occasioning no little astonishment.

In the dawn, a motley throng issued from the Priory woods. Eight men in handcuffs, and two others handcuffed together, formed the most attractive item of the procession. They were strongly guarded by their battered victors. Mr. Foster was being carried by a couple of labourers, for many volunteers had joined the party at daybreak. The yellow man, Gregson, and two others were taken straight to the Cottage Hospital, whither also a keeper and one of the North Countrymen had to be conducted. Fred Browne was borne home on a litter, and Tim used his legs to such good purpose that Surgeon Dawes arrived at the Priory before his patient. Fred fainted again before they got him back, and appeared to be in a very serious condition. His father knew nothing of the event until half an hour afterwards ; then he hurried to the Priory as fast as he could run. Challis finished a really grand night's work by looking after the heroine of the wood and seeing her back to Heather-bridge. She was hysterical and suffering from nervous excitement, though not much

the worse otherwise, save for scratches and cuts.

At five o'clock in the morning, Miss Minnie, who had passed but a bad night, was awakened from troubled sleep by a loud ringing at her front-door bell. Looking out of the window, she beheld her niece, and came down to let her in immediately.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Miss Minnie.

"The most extraordinary thing, Aunt Mercy," answered the visitor, with customary placidity; "it is quite an event—I'm sure everybody will be talking about it—so contrary to order and decency and everything."

"What? What? Don't chatter; come to the point. You might have dressed yourself properly, though the hour is barely five. Your petticoats are—look at them."

"It's Bridget—she's gone—you'll scarcely believe it—actually run away—climbed over the gate, having first dropped out of the dormitory window, a distance of quite six feet. I'm sure

I loved her through everything. And after all you did for her too ! Gone back to that infamous man, no doubt. Such a thing never happened at the Home before. I'm sure the affair will be on everybody's tongue to-day, and get into the paper too. I don't know how I shall face it."

"Set your mind at rest and come in out of the sight of the milk carts," said Miss Minnifie.

Meantime the authorities at the Heatherbridge police-station found their accommodation taxed to the utmost ; the post-office people had been knocked up, in order that special urgent messages might fly to London and Plymouth for surgical aid at the Priory ; Doctor Deane and Surgeon Dawes were mending broken heads for three hours ; and the police, after having interviewed a grim, much injured personage with a broken nose and a smashed rib, known as Barron, succeeded in capturing two out of the four poachers who had made good their escape.

And when the evening of that day came, when sunset lights burnt red on

bole and golden upon autumnal foliage, where the beech-trees spread long, low arms from the fringes of the forest, it was probably agreed by the old cock pheasants who congregated there, that not within the recollection of one amongst them could be cited any parallel to such a peaceful
“First.”

CHAPTER XI.

AFTERWARDS.

MISS MINNIFIE'S niece might have saved herself the trouble of that unduly early call upon her aunt. When she returned to the Home, about six o'clock, the first person of any importance to meet her was Bridget. Mrs. Foster had come back again, and now she told her tale in a shamefaced but forcible manner.

“Faith, I’m a wicked woman, miss. I met me ould divil two days past, and fixed it with him to join him this night at two or so in the mornin’; an’ I waited and waited till dawn, an’ he niver come or showed a yeller whisker of him. ’Tis done now, miss, if ye’ll take me back an’ give me wan more try. I’ve washed both hands of the baste.”

Mrs. Foster had chanced upon her

husband as she said, and he had fixed an hour for their next meeting, his idea being, after the poaching operations, to return that night to Plymouth by road. Half the gang were going there, others to Exeter. Sundry poulterers, whose names did not transpire, had already arranged to buy the game before it was killed.

Mr. Foster, however, failed to keep his appointment with Bridget. He did not know it at the time, but the yellow man was due in another world soon after the hour he had arranged for meeting his wife. He died in the Cottage Hospital the next morning from concussion of the brain, never having recovered consciousness after the terrible blow he had received in the woods. Bridget stood beside him when he died, and she made louder lamentation than might have been expected. Poor Challis, whose heart was soft as his muscles were hard, naturally disturbed himself very deeply over this taking of a fellow-creature's life. Certainly, Mr. Foster had tried to shoot him ; that was the only reflection which gave

him any peace of mind at all. He made Bridget a present of fifty pounds and paid all the funeral expenses. These things brought no little brightness into her life. She stopped at the Home for a time, and ultimately married the gardener of that establishment—he who had once helped to put her in the “quieting-room.”

The rest of the poachers were quite ready for the Exeter Criminal Assizes in November. Of the other party, Barron and Fred Browne proved the principal sufferers. The keeper's life was never in danger, though his injuries were serious and his recovery slow; but it was a month before Fred could be considered really safe again. A London man—Sir James McParritch to wit, the greatest living expert in gun-shot wounds—came down and extracted six shot and charged some hundred guineas; Mr. Round, of Plymouth, the eminent physician, devoted three or four hours a week to the case for a fortnight; Surgeon Dawes was on the spot three times a day to watch events; and between them all,

they prevented what little life remained in Fred from departing. The loss of blood had been the grave feature of the case. Strangely enough, young Browne proved a bad patient and lacked his old nerve and sangfroid. He never grumbled, but he showed little inclination to live. Nobody could put any heart into him. But at last a change came over the scene. One day he expressed a casual wish to learn some particulars of events, and his father, who was sitting with him at the time, told the story. "Thanks to Gregson, it's clear now. The man, thinking you dead, and judging there was no other chance to escape the hemp, meant to cut your hand off. Then that blessed girl—though the Lord only knows how she came there—I haven't heard about it yet—caught him by the arm and stuck to him and opened her mouth pretty wide, I should judge. I can hear her scream now, though she was quite half a mile off. She saved your right hand, and probably your life."

"A woman, governor! That's rum. Who was it?"

Mr. Browne very sagely suspected that the truth might be too startling a matter for Fred just then. So he prevaricated, and explained it was a young person from a cottage on the moor going to her work in Heatherbridge.

“But I shan’t forget her; don’t you fear that, Fred. Wait till you’re yourself, my lad. Your aunt saw her yesterday. She’s none the worse, only bruised a bit.”

“I must see her too, governor, when I’m better. I must thank her myself—fancy a woman saving my hand!”

“Yes, you shall see her, laddy, and shake her hand with the one she’s saved for you.”

And here we may state at once that Marian Deane it was who had been of such particular service to Fred.

Mr. Browne, to do him justice, felt no further objection to Marian, even as a possible daughter-in-law, but she had refused his son, and it struck him that she was not the sort of girl to change her mind. He paid a visit in state to the Deanes, and made much

of them, and kissed Marian, a feat that rather surprised Miss Nancy and his brother James, who both accompanied him.

"Bless you, my dear young lady," he said, holding her hands and looking into her face. "Believe an old father when he says he hardly knows how to thank you."

"You see, when you granted me the privilege of the path through the woods, you did a wise thing, Mr. Browne."

"Thank God, yes."

"Yet I may take a share in the rejoicings too," said Dr. Deane grimly. "But for my being out, Marian would never have gone. I was called to a confinement an hour before the young man came to say the old woman on the moor was dying and wanted to see Marian. Had I been at home, I should not have allowed her to go. As it was, she answered the night bell, and never thinking that such a performance was rather exceptional and unconventional for a young woman, set off in the dead of night to a death-bed. Meantime the messenger came on to me

where I was. But a man cannot be in two places at once. By the time I was able to get up to the moor, the old soul was dead, and Marian had started for home. That's the position in a nutshell."

"Then we certainly have not got to thank you for much, Doctor."

"I hope he gets stronger?" asked Marian.

"Slowly—it's up and down : one day better, the next not so well. There's a danger still, but every day lessens it. A lot of cloth and stuff got carried into his shoulder, and he was badly burnt too—a very complicated gun-shot wound indeed—so McParritch said. But first you, and then McParritch and Dawes and the rest of 'em, have saved his life between you. He'll be out of danger, if God so wills, in a few days' time—say Tuesday. I want you to come and dine one day next week, the whole lot of you. Think you can manage it, Mrs. Deane?"

Mrs. Deane said she thought she could. Her mind was very active. The matter of Marian and Fred had been

in abeyance for some time now. Dr. Deane had not spoken to his daughter upon the subject after all. He held that Providence had deliberately frustrated his former intention, and so he made no attempt to renew it. The fluttering gossip also died out with Fred's departure to Scotland; but it sucked new life from recent circumstances. Everybody asked what sort of reward ought Marian to expect for her wonderful courage and heroic achievement; and everybody agreed that the hand she had rescued might well be hers. The possibility of her not wanting the hand did not occur to a soul.

As for Marian, her emotions are not readily explained. It seemed to her a strange and wonderful thing that this should have happened; that Fred should have been the man on whose behalf she had done such great things—there, by the Poacher's Pool, within twenty yards of the spot where he had asked her to marry him, among the blue-bells. She did not love him any more now than she did then; she knew what love was :

it had raged in her heart and burnt all to ashes. But, after these conflagrations, hearts sometimes emerge renewed like the phoenix from the ashes of past loves—that is, the hearts of every-day folks. Mr. Sprigge-Marshall's last actions had gone far to sweep away even the ashes of Marian's dead regard for him. The present situation was so full of sentiment too. Though Marian did not absolutely love Fred Browne, yet she could feel the sentimental relations now existing between them.

Geoffrey Browne, for his part, believing the matter ended between the young people, set about finding some suitable and practical recognition of Marian's services.

He and his brother and sister talked for two hours on the subject, three days before the evening on which the Deanes were coming to dine. Fred had not been told of the approaching entertainment, and his two nurses were warned to say nothing. The name of Marian Deane was never mentioned, nor had he been heard to mention it himself.

"I think diamonds," said Geoffrey. "I don't pretend to know what girls like—least of all this one, for she's refused a thing that I would have bet my life might suit any young lady in the place. But that's neither here nor there. How do diamonds strike you, Nancy?"

"Honestly, Geoffrey, I think you are too hasty. There is plenty of time—wait until Fred gets better."

"I know what you mean. That's all off. We won't allude to it, but it's off."

Miss Nancy was unsettled.

"It is very dangerous for outsiders to speak confidently about such a thing. I believe that human beings are so curious in such affairs that only their Maker and the parties interested really know when a thing is absolutely on or off. Sometimes the parties interested don't know themselves."

"Really, is that so? Well, it's always a puzzle to me, Nancy, where you get such a devil of a lot of information about love from. But you certainly talk as if you knew. I believe you've been through experiences in your time. How do the

diamonds strike you, James? No trumpery, but diamonds worth four figures, mind you."

"Really, Geoffrey, I'm bound to say that I agree with Nancy. I may be wrong, but I do believe women have better and truer instincts in these things than men. You know what love is, because you were married yourself and all the rest of it; but that is a long time ago now, and you may have forgotten the details. Wait and watch events and let nature take its course."

"Well, the fact of my giving the girl some decent diamonds won't stop nature taking its course, will it?"

"Do it after the event, my dear brother. As a woman with instincts, as James says, let me ask you to wait and do it after the event, and not before."

"There may be no event. I've reasons for believing the whole matter's settled, and that they are no longer anything to each other. If I let my recognition of her conduct slide, people will say I don't know what gratitude is. Not that I mind any opinion which Heatherbridge may

come to ; but I like the girl, and I don't desire her to think I'm backward."

"As a matter of fact, of course you can't pay *her*, Geoffrey; no money—not all you have—would be anything against the loss of Fred's life if he had gone. You know that well enough, I'm sure," said James, delicately.

"My God ! no. You're right there," answered his brother. "That's well spoken, certainly," he added after a pause.

"And then, why diamonds ? Are you sure that is the happiest thought you could have had, Geoffrey ? I am not at all certain that Miss Marian Deane would particularly rejoice in diamonds," said his sister.

"Not like diamonds ?" asked Mr. Browne, blankly.

"I believe she'd much sooner go round the world with Cook's tourists," declared James.

"Or have a little banking account of her own to write cheques herself and do good," suggested Miss Nancy.

"Seems to me you're on to me right

and left with both barrels," grumbled Geoffrey. "I tell you what I'll do," he continued, "I'll leave it a few days, till Fred's up to hearing the truth. I'm going to tell him, all being well, in three or four days' time. Then I'll put it straight and ask him what he'd like me to do. Mind you, I still think diamonds would be all right myself; but you're both so opposed to it that I'll wait."

"Do wait and leave it with Fred. No thought could be happier than that," said Nancy.

"There! I knew you'd hit the right nail on the head, Geoffrey, you always do," declared James.

"A conference is a fine thing when people ain't afraid to differ," concluded Mr. Browne. "Between us we've done the right thing, I do think."

And so the matter was left until Fred's recovery.

It must here be declared that *Timpson's Trumpet* quite under-rated Miss Minnie's performance with respect to the poaching affray. She naturally came in for no little admiration, but of course

Marian's more sensational feats made her the real heroine of the hour. This was rather disappointing and very unexpected.

"I'm sure it was a wonderful interposition of Providence," said Miss Minnie to Mrs. Bird, "a marvellous thing altogether, and I should be quite the last to throw cold water upon it. But what a household must that be from which a girl of her age can promiscuously wander out into private game preserves at midnight! Mrs. Deane has indeed curious notions of how to bring up young women. I am fond of Marian—very much so; and I never sit in judgment on man, woman, or child, but truly Mrs. Deane lacks much which one might hope to find in a mother."

"Really I think Marian lacks nothing, though," said Mrs. Bird. "She is my ideal. I am always wishing Minnie was more like her."

Then the conversation drifted to Miss Minnie's own performance, and she made more of it than her natural inclination suggested, because Mrs. Meadows happened to be present.

"I'm sure," said the Vicar's wife,

“that the entire community owe you a debt of gratitude, Miss Minnie. I think you have a sort of genius for keeping your eyes on the affairs of other people, and so always assisting the authorities towards maintaining law and order.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Meadows,” she answered icily, rather discomfiting the other lady by looking straight into her face. “I’m not sure if your way of putting it is very happy or very courteous; but I think you mean a compliment, and I accept it as such.”

“I hope you will. I want you to, indeed. The vicar bid me congratulate you heartily. It is fortunate that we old women rise superior to mere conventions, too, as Marian Deane did; otherwise, of course, you would not have been prowling about in the neighbourhood of the Priory at that unhallowed hour yourself when you overheard the plot. I’m sure all’s well that ends well.”

“Yes. But the hour was not ‘unhallowed,’ and I was not ‘prowling,’ if you will allow me to explain. You may remember that I left you at your front

door on a night when I came with a message for the vicar. I know you turn day into night at the vicarage and go to bed soon after nine o'clock, but I think even you will admit that nine-thirty is not an 'unhallowed' hour."

"It is a late hour perhaps for a lady to be in the company of poachers—alone. But I dare say I did not have the details rightly. I don't know that anybody is much interested. The less detail the better perhaps. The satisfactory result remains. And pardon me, but as to turning day into night, you are mistaken. Do not believe all you hear so readily, Miss Minnifie. It shows lack of judgment, if you will permit your senior in years to say so. The vicarage retires at ten, and not before. But the vicarage rises at six o'clock, winter and summer—a fact that you may have overlooked.

"Since we are speaking, Mrs. Meadows, I will tell you that I have not overlooked that fact. Perhaps I get as much into a working day even as you do; perhaps—I say 'perhaps'—I get a little more into a working day than you do. I have, at

any rate, a right to my opinion, and it is this : that to rise at six o'clock, winter and summer, is a quite unnecessary proceeding—especially when the rest of the community doesn't."

"Do agree to differ," murmured Mrs. Bird.

"We differ upon so many subjects that if we did not agree to do so I fear Miss Minnie and I should hardly be friends," said Mrs. Meadows.

"I always think you are both such wonderful women," declared Mrs. Bird boldly. "It seems to me that two such large natures, if they only acted in harmony, would make Heatherbridge a sort of paradise to live in. You won't think it highly impertinent of me, will you? I'm so fond of you both, and as a spectator I can see what power you both exercise."

The idea had suddenly come as an inspiration to Mrs. Bird, that if she, by a happy move, could establish friendly relations between these women, it would be a very brilliant performance. There was danger in such a feat ; there was even an element of effrontery in attempting

it, but Mrs. Bird believed in any sudden prompting of the mind. The opportunity was a brilliant one ; she might succeed, which would greatly increase her reputation ; and, on the other hand, she really did not much care if she failed, loving neither party in the least. The two elder ladies were so astounded at her remarks that, after making them, Mrs. Bird had to proceed to fill an awkward silence.

“I’ve lived a long while here, and I’m fortunate in enjoying the friendship of both of you. You both work like giants in Heatherbridge, and the result, if you pulled the same way, would be truly magnificent. But by pulling different ways so much energy and strength is wasted. You are both so clever too. I know I’m on dangerous ground, but having said so much, I must go on. I even risk losing your regard for my bold utterance, and that ought to show you I’m in earnest. Do give and take, dear Mrs. Meadows, and dear Miss Minnie. I believe you’ve both got the same interests at heart. You’re both doing

good from morning till night. Oh, it is such a pity ! What is the point of difference after all ? I don't believe either of you could give it a name."

There was a moment's silence ; Miss Minnie wanted Mrs. Meadows to speak, and the vicar's wife waited for Miss Minnie to do so. The pause lengthened, then Mrs. Meadows answered,—

"I don't know that there was any occasion for these remarks, dear Mrs. Bird. I'm sure you meant well ; but perhaps you have never quite realized that a vicar's wife is—well, a vicar's wife. Surely there can be no pulling different ways against a vicar's wife ? If there were, the feeble tug would not be noticed. You do Miss Minnie a wrong to imagine she would lend what weight she may possess in a contrary direction to that of the vicarage. I am sure of it. With the best intentions, you were unwise to make these remarks. Really I consider that Miss Minnie and I get on very well. If I am wrong she will correct me. Her energy commends itself to me. We differ, I admit—differ a great deal, but only on

trivial points. I think on *trivial* points she is just as likely to take the right view as I am—perhaps more likely. A vicar's wife gets into a habit of holding large views, and sometimes fails in small things. No, really I think there was no occasion for you to have made any remarks at all."

"If I may speak," began Miss Minnie, "I will agree for once, at any rate, with Mrs. Meadows. You had better far have refrained from touching a question that really does not concern you, dear Mrs. Bird. We are friends, and we shall remain so; but I am sorry that your kindly nature has led you into a rather silly action. As the vicar's wife says, I do not pull against her. I never think anything at all about her. I am conscious that errors are being constantly perpetrated—unintelligent errors—and I have no difficulty in tracing them to their source. But their source is nothing to me. Offences must come. My business is to do my duty and rectify errors when they are flaunted under my nose. It is true that on trivial points I take juster views than Mrs. Meadows.

She admits it, which I'm sure gratified me and was an advertisement to her good sense. A vicar's wife is a power—nobody ever doubted that, but there are vicars' wives and vicars' wives. I have been unfortunate in never meeting one who, in my humble opinion, remotely realized her duties. That again is merely a point on which Mrs. Meadows and I probably differ. She knows her own failings and needs no suggestions from me to make her mourn her manifold shortcomings; any more than I want her to point out the faults which I am aware I possess. I have known places where a vicar's wife is a power; I admit it. I have known others where there might be no vicar and no vicar's wife. In such a locality one naturally leads an active existence and tries to do a little towards atoning for a palpable deficiency. I have always felt that here. But I judge none. I never have criticised, and I never shall. I go my own way. Certainly Mrs. Meadows and I get on very well in the conventional acceptance of the phrase. Our views are so different that it would

be impossible for us to get on in any other. I am sorry on the whole that you spoke, Mrs. Bird. Perhaps you are too, by this time. Good-bye ; Good-bye, Mrs. Meadows. I shall forget this conversation as if it had never taken place."

"Good-bye," said the vicar's wife, who had grown very angry during the other's remarks ; "for my part, I shall *forgive* this conversation, as I have forgiven previous words and actions emanating from you ; but as to forgetting it, that would be impossible."

"Well, well, try to," said Miss Minnie with quiet self-possession ; "try to. Go on taking your large views and you'll soon forget a small, trivial incident like this. Good-bye, again."

"Little loathsome wretch ! Little canker-worm, gnawing into the very heart of Heatherbridge ! Why, oh why *does* Heaven let such a cruel curse flourish in this place ?" burst out Mrs. Meadows the moment Miss Minnie had gone. Mrs. Bird tried to soothe her, but only suffered more hard raps for the part she had played.

“All I can say is that you’ll have to make choice between us—you will indeed. How ever could you have been so clumsy? Did you not know the creature by this time?”

And when Mrs. Meadows finally retired, the peacemaker admitted to herself that she had done a very silly, ill-considered, impulsive action.

“I have,” thought Mrs. Bird, regretfully, “made a fool of myself. Good-bye to my reputation for tact.”

But after all, it is the result of any achievement that settles what adjectives are to be applied to it. If a man succeeds in rescuing another from drowning, he is a hero; if he does not succeed and gives his own life into the bargain, then he is a foolhardy idiot, who might have seen in a moment the thing was impossible, like all the onlookers ashore. “Why, sir! I should have been the first to plunge in myself, but I knew it was only flinging one life after another!”

So Mrs. Bird told herself she was a foolhardy idiot, and thoroughly believed

it. If the results had been different, she would have told herself she was a courageous genius ; and she would have thoroughly believed that too.

CHAPTER XII.

AMONG THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS.

WHAT with his sick son, the Criminal Assizes at Exeter, the new railway and the new Library and Reading-room for Heatherbridge, Mr. Geoffrey Browne did not find time hang very heavily upon his hands during the late autumn months. Finally, however, Fred turned the corner towards convalescence; the poachers were sentenced to varying terms of penal servitude, Gregson's performance entitling him to the lengthiest period of incarceration; the railroad was begun, and the site for the Reading-room determined upon. As a rule, the public and official laying of a foundation stone does not happen until the real foundations of a building are long since completed. So it fell out in the matter of the Heather-

bridge Free Library, the gift of Geoffrey Browne, Esquire. When the edifice was already a yard or two above the level of the ground, the desirability of a public function in connection with the matter occurred to James Browne ; and Geoffrey entirely agreed with him that displays of some sort, with perhaps fireworks and a banquet at the Town Hall in the evening, would not be amiss.

“ It’s tomfoolery, of course, but people like it, and fuss of that sort does a place good,” said Geoffrey Browne.

“ Certainly it does,” admitted James. “ A public function is indicated. A foundation stone ought to be laid. That’s always an impressive sight if it’s well done. You have one stone scooped out ; then you put coins in a bottle and place the bottle in the hollowed stone. You also put newspapers of the day there, together with some record of the building itself. Then you lower the foundation stone down on top of these things, and there they lie, perhaps for thousands and thousands of years.”

“ The spectacle of *Timpson’s Trumpet*

of this year of Grace being opened in 3000 or 4000 would be very edifying," said Geoffrey Browne. "But you're quite right," he continued; "the thing shall be done, and Nancy shall lay the stone—eh, Nancy?"

"Not for the Bank of England," exclaimed Miss Browne. "A public appearance in discharge of such an important duty as that would prey on my mind and take years off my life. Please don't even suggest it again, Geoffrey."

"You do it, James," said his brother.

"My dear Geof: I'm honoured by the suggestion; but my sense of perspective and due proportion is really juster than yours in this matter, because you're so modest. You must do it. Nobody else would be adequate in the least."

"Not I. I'm not going to do it. The vicar can, or Mrs. Meadows. We'll settle the point later."

So that great question was left for the present, and the ceremony itself delayed a week or two, until Fred should be well enough to assist at it. Certain events had recently befallen Fred—events of a

rather exceptional character. Probably his father was to blame for putting him in a very awkward position, but he extricated himself without difficulty. It happened the day before that on which Doctor Deane, his wife and Marian were to dine at the Priory, that Fred was seated in a large conservatory which opened from the drawing-room on the western side of the house. As a privileged invalid he was now allowed to do pretty much what he liked, even to smoking a pipe among the chrysanthemums. A beautiful show of them adorned the house in which he sat. Fred liked best the giant, dark, brick-red flowers, wild and straggling of petal, laced with gold on the under-side.

He sat here, smoking, looking very pale and thin, reading Vincent Watford's novel, which Minnie Bird had lent him. Then somebody came into the conservatory from the garden. A bank of bright chrysanthemums hid the door itself, so Fred waited till the new-comer should appear. He expected his uncle, and was startled not a little when he

saw Marian Deane. This was the day on which his father had determined to tell him about Marian's performance in the woods; but he had not heard the news yet, and now faced the girl quite ignorant that she was his preserver.

Fred arose and held out his hand.

"I am very glad to see you again, Miss Deane," he said.

He thought her manner was a little strange when she shook hands. She was almost moved, but quickly recovered herself.

"I was coming through to the drawing-room," she said. "I met Mr. James Browne, and he told me that Miss Browne was in the drawing-room."

"She isn't," answered Fred. "Do sit down here for a few minutes. It does me any amount of good to see—fresh faces."

Marian, rather surprised he had not alluded to the past, and with her heart beating in a way that astonished herself, sat down upon an iron greenhouse seat at hand.

"I'm sure I'm very glad to see you

again. Looking very different from the last time we met."

"Yes, I'm pulled down a bit, of course," he answered. "It's taken it out of me a good deal ; but I'm building up again steadily now. Your people all right?"

"Quite, thank you. But you don't ask after me?"

He started.

"You are well, Marian?—Miss Deane, I mean. Don't say you've been ill?"

Then she saw that, for reasons unknown to herself, Fred had not been told of her share in his rescue.

"No, I have not been ill."

It seemed an extraordinary thing to her that Fred should know so little of the affair. Then he threw some light on the subject.

"I suppose there are all sorts of stories about in Heatherbridge concerning my adventure. It sounds rather absurd to you, I expect, but I'm only partially familiar with facts myself. The governor says I mustn't be excited and must keep quite placid and put my thoughts away

from everything sensational. So I don't know myself the rights of things."

"Is he going to tell you soon, or leave you to find out?"

"No, he's going to tell me to-day. He named this day a week ago. He's made a lot of mystery where I shouldn't think there need have been any. But he's so frightened that I shall get over-excited, you know. To-morrow, so he says, somebody's going to dine here—in the servants' hall, I suppose. That somebody's the girl who practically saved my life."

"Oh, they've told you that?"

"Yes—it's true, isn't it?"

"Heatherbridge says a woman had something to do with it."

"It's true, no doubt. They couldn't go wrong in a matter of fact like that. The extraordinary thing is that a girl should have been there at all at such a time. What particular version of the story came to your ears, I wonder?"

"I heard that a girl had been in some cottage on the moor to see a poor old soul who was dying, that she started for

home again, just before dawn, and was passing along by the 'Poacher's Pool.' There she saw two black figures, and one raised a knife that flashed in the moonlight. Then the girl dashed at the man who held the knife and screamed, and so brought help in time—"

"In time to save my hand being cut off. That's all true enough, Miss Deane. That's pretty much what the governor told me. Then he shut up in the most exasperating fashion and wouldn't give me any more details. You may guess I'm rather anxious to see her. Was she much knocked about, I wonder? An awfully plucky thing: I should think Heatherbridge would make rather a fuss over her."

"Oh, no. Why? She just happened to be there, and was a tall, strong young woman, and so held the poacher's arm. You see, his left hand was handcuffed to you, so he could not do her much harm."

"I don't know. It seems to me a wonderful thing for any woman to have done. A tall, strong woman, you

say? Tough, and wiry, and elderly, I expect."

"No, rather youngish."

"D'you know her, Miss Deane?" asked Fred rather eagerly.

"Strangely enough, I do, Mr. Browne."

At that moment Fred's father came into the conservatory. He entered from the garden, without noticing who were talking together within. Had he observed them, he would have left them in peace. But now he could not do less than walk through the conservatory and enter the house.

"Gov'nor," said Fred, "I'm hearing secrets. Miss Deane knows the girl who saved my hand."

"Does she now?" exclaimed Mr. Browne, with great simulation of surprise. "Well, that's odd! But the world's very small. D'you know what I heard to-day? I heard it said with authority, that the least you could do, Fred, was to marry the young woman who saved you! Ha—ha! What d'you think of that? What d'you think of that, Miss Deane? Two labourers said it, and James over-

heard 'em and told me, and I said, 'Blessed if I don't think that's about a fair bargain.' "

Geoffrey Browne bolted after this startling statement. He merely shook hands with Marian and walked through the conservatory, talking all the time. He considered his remarks had been most diplomatic. He told his sister afterwards what he had said, and she did not hesitate to declare her brother's action very vulgar.

Fred Browne thought the same.

"The pater's jokes vary in refinement," he murmured, after his father had departed.

But Marian did not answer immediately. She read a good deal more in Mr. Browne's remark than Fred could. To her it said exactly what it was meant to say: that Geoffrey Browne had no objection to the idea of her as a daughter-in-law.

"You can tell me what he wouldn't," continued Fred. "What's the heroine like?"

"Not beautiful, I'm sorry to say—a big girl with dark hair and slate-

coloured eyes, an extensive mouth and sallow cheeks."

"Her name?"

"Let me think now; what on earth was her name?" said Marian, frowning.

"It doesn't matter. I suppose I shall see her to-morrow. Let us talk about something more interesting."

"Very well," said Marian. "But I'm afraid you won't see her to-morrow."

"Why not?"

"You'll be surprised that I should know anything about it, but I happen to. She was coming to dine with her father and mother; and they were going to dine with your people, not in the servants' hall at all. Mr. Browne asked them himself."

"To dine with him! What an old Radical he is!"

"He has been very kind indeed to the young woman. He thanked her with tears in his eyes, and actually kissed her!"

"'Kissed her!' That's very unlike him. He hates any show of feeling, don't you know. When I came to again, after they got me home from the woods (they thought I was done for the second

time that I went off in a faint). But when I came round, guv'nor was standing by, and he said: 'Ah, laddy, alive! Thank God for His mercies. Thought you'd gone for good.' Then he marched off."

"Still, there were tears in his eyes when he kissed her."

"But why are not these folks coming?"

"The mother is poorly, so they cannot manage it."

"Surely you are not their spokeswoman? They don't send you on their messages—these mysterious folks?"

"I came up to the Priory with the girl herself," said Marian simply.

"Well, hang it all, if she's here, I might as well see her, don't you think so? I suppose she's a bit nervous, but I'm sure she needn't be. I'm hardly an awe-inspiring spectacle, am I?"

"No. I really don't think you are. But she's not in the least frightened of seeing you."

"I should hope not. Then why shouldn't I see her?"

"I can think of no reason at all."

"Then do call her in, if I may ask you to. I would myself, but I am not supposed to move about much yet."

"There's no occasion to call her in," said Marian, turning as though somebody was behind the great shining bank of chrysanthemums. "She is in."

"Really!" and Fred leant forward and lowered his voice. "Then she's heard every word we've said?"

"Every syllable."

"And your rather unflattering description of her appearance?"

"Yes, of course. As Miss Minnie says, nobody need mind hearing the truth."

"Ask her to come nearer."

"She's—she's as near you as she can get, Mr. Browne."

But she was not. Fred looked into the grey laughing eyes, with something like a tear in them, too; and he read the truth there.

"Marian! you, you!"

He jumped to his feet, despite orders, and stood quite close to her among the chrysanthemums.

“What a fool I’ve been—what an idiot—not to guess till now. Oh, Marian!”

“But I never knew it was you at all until afterwards, Mr. Browne.”

“You—you saved my life! You made it seem worth living in the past; you changed the whole current of it then. After that you came near to wrecking it altogether—by the Poacher’s Pool. Then, by the Poacher’s Pool again, you saved it.”

“It’s a wonderfully beautiful thing to feel you have really saved a life. But, after all, I’m not sure that I did as much as that.”

“Of course you did. He would have cut off my wretched hand while I was insensible, and I must have bled to death there, without a soul to help me. Oh, think if I’d followed you when I heard those footsteps I couldn’t understand! I should have warned you not to go back into the woods, and then—”

“Yes, I almost think I saved your life.”

“It’s quite clear. And it’s an awful responsibility for you.”

His tone changed so suddenly that she started.

“What did you save it for, Marian?”

“Because God wished it to be saved, Fred, I suppose.”

He heard the word “Fred” and his heart jumped. She had said it by accident, and now, realizing the mistake, blushed.

“I must go, indeed,” she stammered. “Will you tell your father, Mr. Browne, that—?”

“Don’t go; and don’t talk any more about Mr. Browne, please.”

His left arm was in a sling, but with his right hand he took hers as it hung at her side, and, suddenly, before she could stop him, kissed it.

“Mr. Browne!”

“Nonsense,” he said, towering above her, but still holding her hand, “a dog licks its master’s palm, a man may salute the hand that saved his life. Marian, Marian, don’t turn away from me again! You must take it—you shall take it: that wretched hand you saved from being shorn off at the wrist! I love you

more than ever, Marian—ten thousand times more than ever. I know you don't love me, of course you don't, but you feel a little kinder, just a little—a very little—”

He broke off and bent down and looked into her lowered eyes.

“Marian! you love me—you do—just an atom—there's a dawn of it—a precious glimmering dawn of it!”

“Oh, Fred, you good, faithful Fred—but are you sure that it would be well?”

He was absolutely certain. In his weak condition he grew dazed and drunk with the unexpected joy of an event the morning had not so much as shadowed. And the chrysanthemums saw what the blue-bells had wished to see but did not.

Marian fled straight home from the conservatory with Fred's kiss hot on her cheek, and in her heart a sense of unutterable bewilderment at the turn of events. She had begun to love Fred. She knew what love was and she felt there could be no mistake. He had taken her by surprise and hurried on the growing passion—forced it under glass in fact.

Whether it was his white face or his arm in a sling or the thought of all that he had gone through, or the reflection that he still worshipped her with all his heart and soul—whatever the cause, the fact remained that Marian certainly found herself regarding Fred with honest and increasing affection.

Can storms rise and rage and sink and die in a woman's heart and leave all calm for fresh storms so soon? Is it really possible for a young maid to love twice—and with all her heart each time? I suppose no great soul could do so, but some every-day young women might. Marian Deane certainly did. The old fire was out, the ashes scattered to the winds, and a new one, small perhaps, but well alight and destined to burn brightly and last a lifetime, had begun to flicker.

Which condition of things appears to wind up the little romance of these two young creatures. What can be said for such a conventional boy and girl? Will they actually marry and live happily and respectably afterwards? Certainly such

a thing could not happen nowadays, except in real life.

"Pretty and pleasing and quite like a story-book. I'm sure I hope it will conduce to the eternal welfare of both. A grand thing for the Deanes, of course," declared Miss Minnifie, when she heard of the engagement. "It's the only match that I've ever been indirectly responsible for in my life," she added.

"How much better Minnie would have suited him, Major," said Mrs. Bird, after their daughter burst into the room with the news and then tore off again to spread it elsewhere. "Such an ideal country squire's wife, Minnie! And Marian just the woman for an author to marry, I should think. These things fall out so curiously!"

"Grand thing for the Deanes," said the Major.

"What a singularly charming woman Mrs. Deane is, Fuller," remarked Mrs. Meadows the day after the engagement was publicly known. "I called this afternoon and really felt quite struck. I have always stood up for her and said

there was more behind her quiet, retiring manner than people thought. It seemed quite a relief to her to-day, amid all the clatter and buzz of congratulation, to get into a corner after tea and talk privately to me. The doctor has come round. Such a proud man. Actually pretended not to like it. Rather absurd, of course. A grand thing for them all."

"Lucky devil! Why didn't I meet that brute and get half murdered? Then this might have happened to me. And to hear people talk, knowing what I know! It's a simple beast of a world really, if you get under the rind." That was Tim Bird's reflection. But, of course, he kept it to himself.

"What I thinks is this, Commander Cragg," said Joe Hannaford to the old sailor; "seems like to me, sir, that Miss Minnie was at the bottom of it. 'Twas her cuteness that blew up that Gregson crew, and she don't get her measure of credit. Now if marryin's the reward—why, she did ought to be the fust to step down 'long to church with Mr. Geoffrey Browne, *and maybe she will do so!* Now

that's right; an' Gaffer Merle, he said same thing; an' he be a far-thinking man, and ain't often out."

"He's a damned old fool if he said that; and it's high time he died; and you're another fool for repeating it," snorted the Commander with indignation.

"'Surprised'? Not I, I assure you," said Surgeon Dawes at the club. "I think I may pretend to some knowledge of character. I've seen it in the girl's face ever since last Christmas. I don't mean she's actually fished for him and captured him; but — well, something rather like it. Grand thing for the Deanes!"

And all the young people talked about it too, according to their natures—making kind and unkind remarks—none worth repeating.

Minnie Bird told Miss Minnifie's niece, by the bridge over the stream in the Park.

"Dear me! That ought to be a grand thing for the Deanes, oughtn't it?" said Miss Minnifie's niece.

CHAPTER XIII.

EXEUNT OMNES.

“THE more I think of it, the harder a solution to the problem appears,” said Geoffrey Browne. “There’s Sir Hastings Forest, the Lord of the Manor—he might lay this blessed foundation stone all right. In fact, one would think he was the man to do it. But he’s not popular ; and he doesn’t care a straw for Heatherbridge, and we ain’t the best of friends—he and I.”

“I think there are enough important people to choose from in Heatherbridge itself, Geoffrey,” said Miss Browne.

“ ‘ Enough ’ ! Too many, I should say. Everybody’s important in Heatherbridge. I never saw such a swarm of celebrities in my life.”

“Begin by dismissing those who won’t

do, and then make selection from the names which are left," suggested James.

"Good idea, James," said Geoffrey.

"And to further simplify your difficulty, you might put the women out of the question. I shouldn't suggest a woman. Royal ladies lay foundation stones; it is an every-day duty with them, but not ordinary women," said Nancy.

"I don't agree with you there. I consider that a lady ought to do it, and as you won't, we must look elsewhere."

"I really don't fancy there are many who would care to undertake it, Geoffrey."

"I'm not sure of that. I think I know two at least who would tackle it, and make a good job of it into the bargain. After all, they've only got to handle a little silver trowel, and pat a bit of mortar, and declare the stone to be well and truly laid. Workmen do all the rest. The two I've my eye on are Mrs. Meadows and Miss Minnie. They come first, the rest nowhere."

"I don't think there can be any question between them, Geof," said James.
"Mrs. Meadows represents the official,

recognized Church party. Miss Minnie is a sort of free lance. Mind you, I admire her, but it would be more conventional and satisfactory to have Mrs. Meadows. Really I think so."

"I agree with James, though I like Miss Minnie best," declared Miss Nancy.

"You may be right," replied their brother, "but there are other points to be considered. We owe Miss Minnie something. We don't owe Mrs. Meadows anything at all. I dislike being in anybody's debt. You see, though the row in the woods turned out a devilish serious business, yet it may be said to have ended well, and she's responsible. Now it's not easy to pay her for her trouble. But this looks to me a good way. To lay this foundation stone is just a bit of work after her own heart. She'd jump at the job."

"People would criticise and question your judgment," objected James.

"Of course. I don't know that that matters."

"My fear would be that it might raise

up enemies against dear Miss Minnie herself," said Nancy.

"That wouldn't be a new sensation for her."

"You see, Mrs. Meadows might resent it. The vicar has thrown himself so into the scheme," argued Miss Browne.

"Well, candidly, I like the idea. I think that Miss Minnie will be very pleased, and I consider that it is a happy way to pay my debt; so there's an end of it," said Geoffrey Browne.

The same evening he sent his brother to see Miss Minnie.

"You don't, of course, know how things have been arranged, do you?" James began by asking her.

"Yes, I think I know all that is known," she answered. "It is proposed to make a public matter of the affair and get Mrs. Meadows to lay the foundation stone. I hardly fancy that any ceremony was necessary. It only takes people away from their work and costs money. However, that is your brother's affair. I have always said the gift itself was most munificent. Perhaps a more

fitting person than Mrs. Meadows might have been chosen to perform the function—not that I criticise. But she cannot be impressive in public, or anywhere for that matter. However, I should certainly have been there myself—out of compliment to the Priory, not the Vicarage; but unfortunately I have to go to Exeter.”

“Dear me! That is unfortunate—and more so than you think. You have been misinformed about the affair. Geoffrey is not going to ask Mrs. Meadows to lay the stone. I am his ambassador to you. He is very anxious to obtain your consent, I assure you. He wants you to lay it. I am commissioned to use my best endeavours. You will be doing him a great favour. He considers you are the representative of such varied interests here; and he knows the affair would not lose dignity in your hands. He wants it to be dignified naturally.”

Miss Minnifie was so overcome that she gasped and dropped her glasses. She also entirely forgot her very recent utterances.

"It should be dignified, and the ceremony is desirable, because we are marking a step on the road to *real* Progress. Those who have the interest of Heatherbridge at heart cannot fail to see and feel the significance of this ceremonial. I think your brother's judgment is wonderful for such a comparatively new arrival. Certainly, as the representative of varied interests, as you well put it, I will undertake to lay the stone."

"He will be very glad to hear it—as glad as I am, Miss Minnie. Shall you be able to put off your visit to Exeter?"

"My duty makes it necessary now, Mr. Browne. Under the circumstances my duty will lie here. Let me see—November the twenty-third—isn't it? I shall see your brother before that. I would rather not make a speech or anything of that kind. Women push themselves forward too much nowadays. Just a very few appropriate words—that is all."

"We shall be quite safe with you, Miss Minnie. You will say just the right thing; nobody would doubt that."

But it need hardly be said that a good many did doubt it. Her nearest and dearest friends were jubilant, but extremely nervous. They remembered the last time a Minnie spoke in public. Her enemies, of course, were openly shocked that Mr. Browne could have made such a stupid move. Where was his tact and judgment? What could he have been thinking of? What on earth would Mrs. Meadows say? Only the vicar could have answered that question.

“‘Go’? D’you actually think, Fuller, that *any* woman in my position would go after this? I should like to see the angel from Heaven who would go! No; let her make a fool of herself in her old black silk and sealskin jacket and trumpery! I don’t stop to see it; I go to Exeter for the day. And I don’t want to have anything more to do with the Brownes again either. This stamps them. I’m sick of Heatherbridge—sick and tired of it. The Radical element is like vile leaven, creeping through the lump. It makes you out of heart with everybody.

Such grotesque taste! That despicable woman—to choose *her* of all others. The creature simply haunts me. I see through it; I understand, of course. But I'm not going to sit down under it for you or anybody. If you were a man you would meet Geoffrey Browne face to face and *demand* an explanation."

And so forth.

"Don't let it unduly agitate your sensibilities, my love. I think with you that the judgment of Mr. Browne is at fault in this case; but he may have been actuated by motives of which we are ignorant," answered Fuller Meadows, when his wife stopped for breath. The vicar's disposition to take charitable views of most questions showed him a very wise man and often brought him directly to the truth, as in this case. But he never got much credit for wisdom.

"A funny choice—perhaps foolish on the whole," said Mrs. Bird, when she heard of it. "I am glad Vincent will be here at the time of the affair. He may get material for some merriment for a book. I fear an element of farce will

creep into a display that should be altogether impressive. She is such a tiny woman."

"I believe she bewitches people," said the Major.

Young Watford came in due course and brought an item or two of interesting information with him.

"I was staying in Kent with my Aunt Jane recently. She has made some new friends, among them a widower and his daughter. On second thoughts I cannot describe the daughter as a friend. She was very plain-spoken and her hostile attitude towards my aunt was so clear that I jumped to a conclusion. It would not astound me if Aunt Jane were married next Spring at the latest."

The note of hope in these words was grateful to all. Even Bunny and Dicky rejoiced with their family, catching the prevalent exhilaration of spirit.

Let us, however, advance this brief final survey in other directions before terminating it.

The Deanes continue for the present to be the cynosure of Heatherbridge's

eyes. Dr. Deane liked not the engagement overmuch, but became accustomed to the idea after a while. The wedding was one of the Christmas fixtures. It would take place at the end of the year. Then, after a month or two on the Continent, Mrs. and Mr. Fred Browne proposed to settle in London. Fred was going to identify himself with a political party and in due course become a power in his native land.

“Yes,” said Geoffrey to his brother James, “it might sound a moonshiny sort of programme to other people, but it don’t to me. I know the boy and understand him. These blessed love affairs came at a bad time and toppled him off his perch just when he ought to have stuck to it closest. But what’s done’s done. The brain power’s there, and the will and the grit. Let him get through all the honeymoon foolery and settle into a sober married man—if he can at such a childish age—and then he’ll have to get to work and do some good, or I’ll know the reason why not.”

“Of course he will. The brain is

there, as you say, Geof. You remember how I've always said he's cut out for a man of mark. And another thing : such a wife as Marian will be a help rather than a hindrance. She is strong. Though a bachelor, I'm not a prejudiced one. Many natures ripen under matrimony, and Fred has such a nature."

"Well spoken, James. I think so too," said Geoffrey Browne.

"You ought to write down the things you sometimes say, James. They are so wise and forcible," declared Miss Nancy. "'Many natures ripen under matrimony' sounds almost like a text."

"Perhaps one does say a good thing sometimes," admitted James modestly. "A person with any claim to intelligence must do so, you know. And we live in such a busy, ever-changing scene. I really think that Heatherbridge sharpens one's wits—or it may be the Dartmoor air."

And here, though on the threshold of events which should prove interesting and exciting to the last degree, I propose to

take leave of Heatherbridge. My task is completed, my object attained to the best of my power. What have we done, reader? For the space of one year we have watched the lives of some every-day folks in an every-day place. A small feat, truly; but if the record has been common-place and the recital tedious, let me direct you where to throw the fault. Blame the manner of telling, not the matter of the tale; question him who writes the chronicle, not the society he describes or the spot he has been concerned with. Little people, little interests, little places, are gold mines if a man understands how to dig in them. Sometimes one may light upon a story full of fascination; oftener, there is none to tell. Then the task presents increased difficulties, needing a strong hand in the solution. Heatherbridge offered no particular story, and I am therefore fearful that this chapter in its history will fall far short of much which those who are likely to read it expect and demand. But truth I sought; a true picture it was my ambition to produce. I have turned one

page in the lives of some every-day folks; that is all.

There is a train in half-an-hour from the railway station, three miles off. Let us take that ram-shackle fly and bid the driver urge his mean steed into action. "Catch it? Yes, an' time to spare. This 'oss bain't nothing to look at, but he's good for eight mile an hour, if he's pushed."

So we will drive out of Heatherbridge together.

We are crossing over the little bridge across the stream that runs through the Park. The red-brick building, rising below the forest of scaffold poles? That is the Free Library, to be opened in a fortnight. See! Miss Minnie talking to her niece at the street corner.

"Lor! Whatever shall you say, Aunt?"

"Very little, and that little to the point. I admit it is not easy to choose the best words. At such times, when doubt and difficulty rises in the mind, how I miss him—my father."

"It would have been a proud day for him, Aunt Mercy. He'd have loved to know about it."

"As to that, I am confident that he does know about it. His dear eyes will be watching me out of another world," says Miss Minnie, with conviction. After that she changes the subject. "Mind your girls are all there in uniform. A special bench will be set aside for them in the tent."

Then she bustles on, walking quicker up the hill than our cab-horse.

Away there to the left you can see "Cragg's Flag"—untouched as yet, but its days are numbered: the new Heather-bridge railway station will stand there. Already the approaching viaduct is begun.

That neat house we have just passed, with a giant monkey-puzzle in front and all the blinds down? It is "Trafalgar Lodge." The Commander is away for a two months' cruise. He started three days before it was publicly known that Miss Minnie was going to lay the foundation stone of the Free Library. Had he heard

of that, he would not, of course, have left England until after the ceremony.

Yes, the little road branching to the right is a typical Devonshire lane, as you say. If you followed it for a mile or so, past a gate, where the farm carts turn and the lane is all ruts and grass under a dome of hazel, laced with honeysuckle in Summer, you would find a gate and a little stream, where water-cress grows.

It was on the gate that one Rev. Marshall Sprigge-Marshall sat and suffered last Spring. It would be interesting to know how South Africa suits him, and how he suits South Africa.

There is the station—that lonely, wooden shed below, with silvery threads winding in on one side and out on the other. The signal is down, and I note a puff of white smoke rolling far away in the valley. You can just see the train, looking like a toy, and winding over that lofty bridge two miles off. We shall do it, with a minute to spare, for the rest of the road is down-hill.

Bless me ! There is that rational Mr. Parkhouse on the platform ! And Surgeon

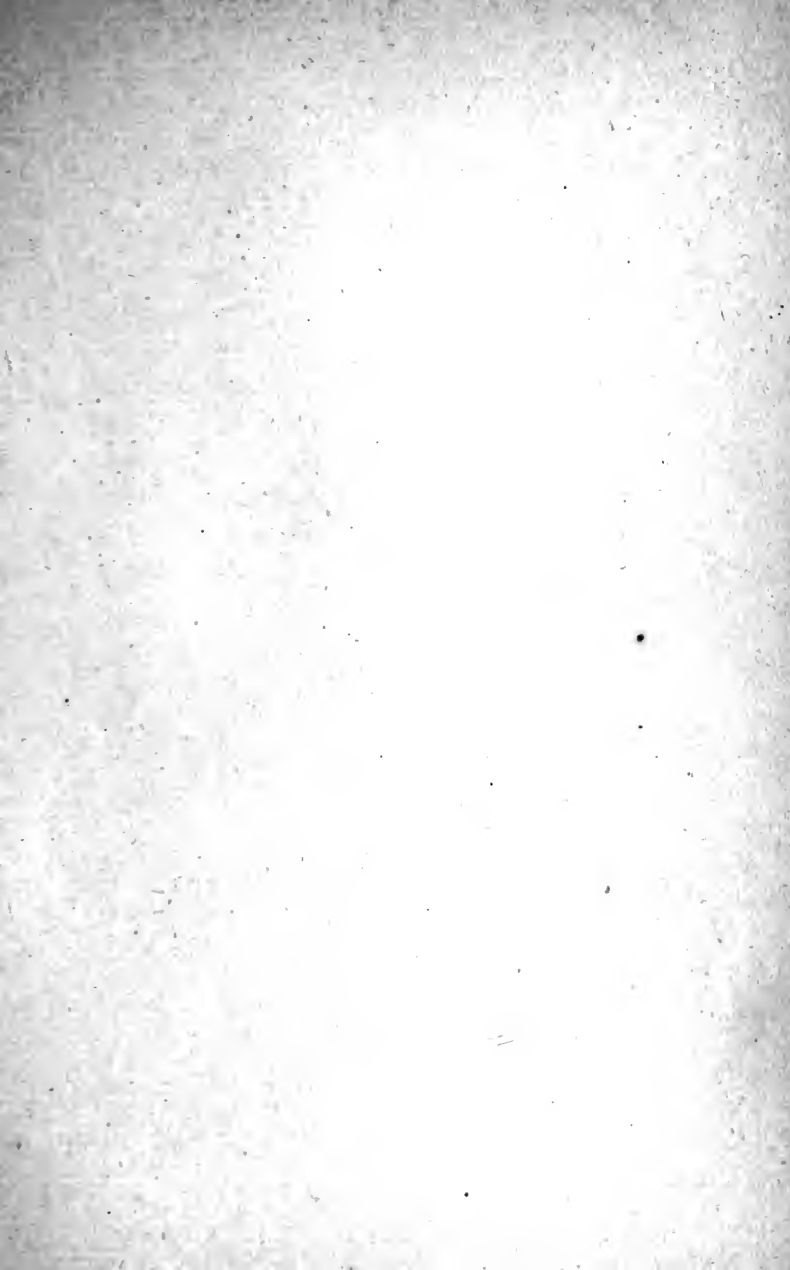
Dawes too. Both are travelling by our train.

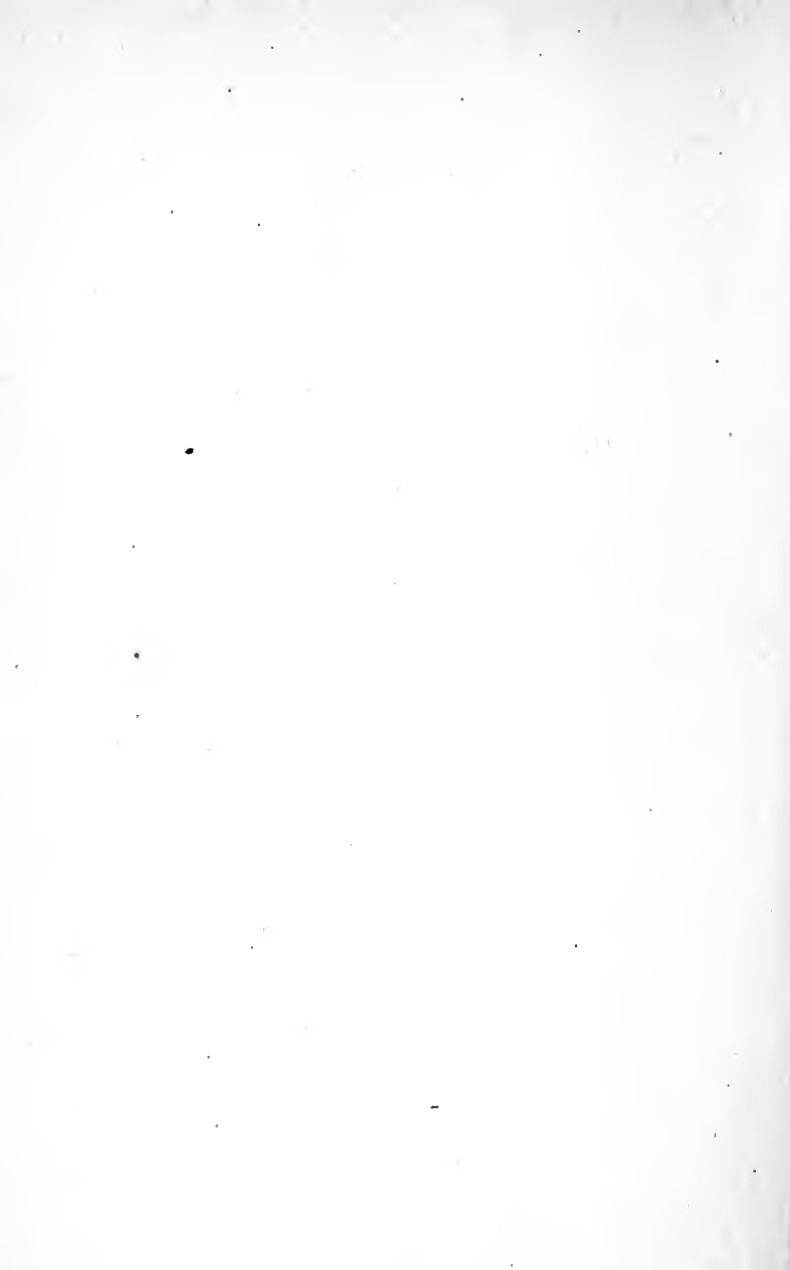
"It will be published after Christmas, Surgeon. I have corrected the last proof sheets this morning. I am weary of seeing myself in print."

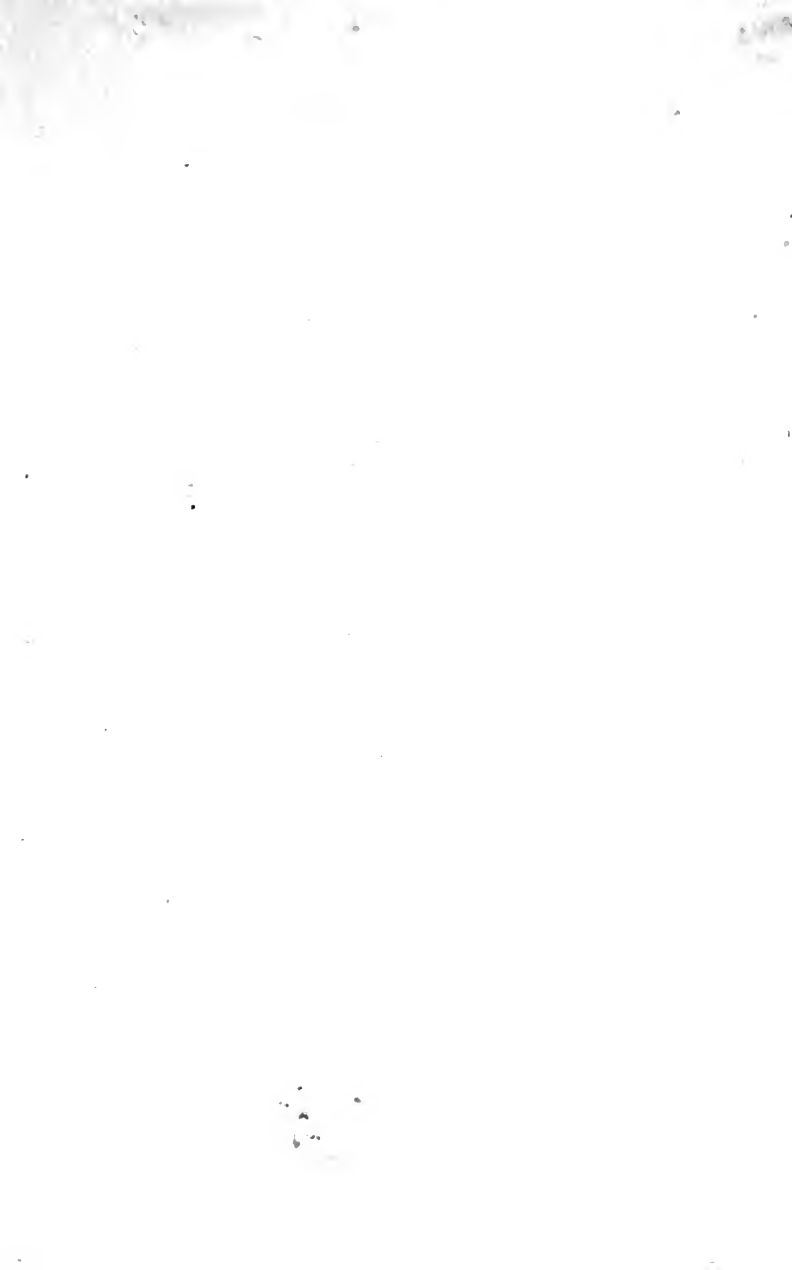
A startling assertion for an author, that!

"Well, I hope it may make a stir, Parkhouse, I do indeed," answers Dawes. "We want some hard thinkers to point with firm hand to the abuses of the present hour. Mind you, I see things as clearly as you do. I can put my hand on all the rotten points in latter-day civilization; but, of course, I've got no time for writing. Must leave that to you idle men. Going third? Well, good-bye for the present."

Mr. Parkhouse turns away, sneering, and the Surgeon sails into a first-class compartment.







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